

## CHAPTER VIII. BILLY'S FIRST COMMAND

AND so it was that having breakfasted in the morning Bridge and Miguel started downward toward the valley protected by an escort under Captain Billy Byrne. An old service jacket and a wide-brimmed hat, both donated by brother officers, constituted Captain Byrne's uniform. His mount was the largest that the picket line of Pesita's forces could produce. Billy loomed large amongst his men.

For an hour they rode along the trail, Billy and Bridge conversing upon various subjects, none of which touched upon the one uppermost in the mind of each. Miguel rode, silent and preoccupied. The evening before he had whispered something to Bridge as he had crawled out of the darkness to lie close to the American, and during a brief moment that morning Bridge had found an opportunity to relay the Mexican's message to Billy Byrne.

The latter had but raised his eyebrows a trifle at the time, but later he smiled more than was usual with him. Something seemed to please him immensely.

Beside him at the head of the column rode Bridge and Miguel. Behind them trailed the six swarthy little troopers--the picked men upon whom Pesita could depend.

They had reached a point where the trail passes through a narrow dry arroyo which the waters of the rainy season had cut deep into the soft, powdery soil. Upon either bank grew cacti and mesquite, forming a sheltering screen behind which a regiment might have hidden. The place was ideal for an ambushade.

"Here, Senor Capitan," whispered Miguel, as they neared the entrance to the trap.

A low hill shut off from their view all but the head of the cut, and it also hid them from the sight of any possible enemy which might have been lurking in wait for them farther down the arroyo.

At Miguel's words Byrne wheeled his horse to the right away from the trail which led through the bottom of the waterway and around the base of the hill, or rather in that direction, for he had scarce deviated from the direct way before one of the troopers spurred to his side, calling out in Spanish that he was upon the wrong trail.

"Wot's this guy chewin' about?" asked Billy, turning to Miguel.

"He says you must keep to the arroyo, Senor Capitan," explained the Mexican.

"Tell him to go back into his stall," was Byrne's laconic rejoinder, as he pushed his mount forward to pass the brigand.

The soldier was voluble in his objections. Again he reined in front of Billy, and by this time his five fellows had spurred forward to block the way.

"This is the wrong trail," they cried. "Come this other way, Capitan. Pesita has so ordered it."

Catching the drift of their remarks, Billy waved them to one side.

"I'm bossin' this picnic," he announced. "Get out o' the way, an' be quick about it if you don't want to be hurted."

Again he rode forward. Again the troopers interposed their mounts, and this time their leader cocked his carbine. His attitude was menacing. Billy was close to him. Their ponies were shoulder to shoulder, that of the bandit almost broadside of the trail.

Now Billy Byrne was more than passing well acquainted with many of the fundamental principles of sudden brawls. It is safe to say that he had never heard of Van Bibber; but he knew, as well as Van Bibber knew, that it is well to hit first.

Without a word and without warning he struck, leaning forward with all the weight of his body behind his blow, and catching the man full beneath the chin he lifted him as neatly from his saddle as though a battering ram had struck him.

Simultaneously Bridge and Miguel drew revolvers from their shirts and as Billy wheeled his pony toward the remaining five they opened fire upon them.

The battle was short and sweet. One almost escaped but Miguel, who proved to be an excellent revolver shot, brought him down at a hundred yards. He then, with utter disregard for the rules of civilized warfare, dispatched those who were not already dead.

"We must let none return to carry false tales to Pesita," he explained.

Even Billy Byrne winced at the ruthlessness of the cold-blooded murders; but he realized the necessity which confronted them though he could not have brought himself to do the things which the Mexican did with such sang-froid and even evident enjoyment.

"Now for the others!" cried Miguel, when he had assured himself that each of the six were really quite dead.

Spurring after him Billy and Bridge ran their horses over the rough ground at the base of the little hill, and then parallel to the arroyo for a matter of a hundred yards, where they espied two Indians, carbines in hand, standing in evident consternation because of the unexpected fusillade of shots which they had just heard and which they were unable to account for.

At the sight of the three the sharpshooters dropped behind cover and fired. Billy's horse stumbled at the first report, caught himself, reared high upon his hind legs and then toppled over, dead.

His rider, throwing himself to one side, scrambled to his feet and fired twice at the partially concealed men. Miguel and Bridge rode in rapidly to close quarters, firing as they came. One of the two men Pesita had sent to assassinate his "guests" dropped his gun, clutched at his breast, screamed, and sank back behind a clump of mesquite. The other turned and leaped over the edge of the bank into the arroyo, rolling and tumbling to the bottom in a cloud of dry dust.

As he rose to his feet and started on a run up the bed of the dry stream, dodging a zigzag course from one bit of scant cover to another Billy Byrne stepped to the edge of the washout and threw his carbine to his shoulder. His face was flushed, his eyes sparkled, a smile lighted his regular features.

"This is the life!" he cried, and pulled the trigger.

The man beneath him, running for his life like a frightened jackrabbit, sprawled forward upon his face, made a single effort to rise and then slumped limply down, forever.

Miguel and Bridge, dismounted now, came to Byrne's side. The Mexican was grinning broadly.

"The captain is one grand fighter," he said. "How my dear general would admire such a man as the captain. Doubtless he would make him a colonel. Come with me Senor Capitan and your fortune is made."

"Come where?" asked Billy Byrne.

"To the camp of the liberator of poor, bleeding Mexico--to General Francisco Villa."

"Nothin' doin'," said Billy. "I'm hooked up with this Pesita person now, an' I guess I'll stick. He's given me more of a run for my money in the last twenty-four hours than I've had since I parted from my dear old friend, the Lord of Yoka."

"But Senor Capitan," cried Miguel, "you do not mean to say that you are going back to Pesita! He will shoot you down with his own hand when he has learned what has happened here."

"I guess not," said Billy.

"You'd better go with Miguel, Billy," urged Bridge. "Pesita will not forgive you this. You've cost him eight men today and he hasn't any more men than he needs at best. Besides you've made a monkey of him and unless I miss my guess you'll have to pay for it."

"No," said Billy, "I kind o' like this Pesita gent. I think I'll stick around with him for a while yet. Anyhow until I've had a chance to see his face after I've made my report to him. You guys run along now and make your get-away good, an' I'll beat it back to camp."

He crossed to where the two horses of the slain marksmen were hidden, turned one of them loose and mounted the other.

"So long, boes!" he cried, and with a wave of his hand wheeled about and spurred back along the trail over which they had just come.

Miguel and Bridge watched him for a moment, then they, too, mounted and turned away in the opposite direction. Bridge recited no verse for the balance of that day. His heart lay heavy in his bosom, for he missed Billy Byrne, and was fearful of the fate which awaited him at the camp of the bandit.

Billy, blithe as a lark, rode gaily back along the trail to camp. He looked forward with unmixed delight to his coming interview with Pesita, and to the wild, half-savage life which association with the bandit promised. All his life had Billy Byrne fed upon excitement and adventure. As gangster, thug, holdup man and second-story artist Billy had found food for his appetite within the dismal, sooty streets of Chicago's great West Side, and then Fate had flung him upon the savage shore of Yoka to find other forms of adventure where the best that is in a strong man may be brought out in the stern battle for existence against primeval men and conditions. The West Side had developed only Billy's basest characteristics. He might have slipped back easily into the old ways had it not been for HER and the recollection of that which he had read in her eyes. Love had been there; but greater than that to hold a man into the straight and narrow path of decency and honor had been respect and admiration. It had seemed incredible to Billy that a goddess should feel such things for him--for the same man her scornful lips once had branded as coward and mucker; yet he had read the truth aright, and since then Billy Byrne had done his best according to the light that had been given him to deserve the belief she had in him.

So far there had crept into his consciousness no disquieting doubts as to the consistency of his recent action in joining the force of a depredating Mexican outlaw. Billy knew nothing of the political conditions of the republic. Had Pesita told him that he was president of Mexico, Billy could not have disputed the statement from any knowledge of facts which he possessed. As a matter of fact about all Billy had ever known of Mexico was that it had some connection with an important place called Juarez where running meets were held.

To Billy Byrne, then, Pesita was a real general, and Billy, himself, a bona fide captain. He had entered an army which was at war with some other army. What they were warring about Billy knew not, nor did he care. There should be fighting and he loved that--that much he knew. The ethics of Pesita's warfare troubled him not. He had heard that some great American general had said: "War is hell." Billy was willing to take his word for it, and accept anything which came in the guise of war as entirely proper and as it should be.

The afternoon was far gone when Billy drew rein in the camp of the outlaw band. Pesita with the bulk of his raiders was out upon some excursion to the north. Only half a dozen men lolled about, smoking or sleeping away the hot day. They looked at Billy in evident surprise when they saw him riding in alone; but they asked no questions and Billy offered no explanation--his report was for the ears of Pesita only.

The balance of the day Billy spent in acquiring further knowledge of Spanish by conversing with those of the men who remained awake, and asking innumerable questions. It was almost sundown when Pesita rode in. Two riderless horses were led by troopers in the rear of the little column and three men swayed painfully in their saddles and their clothing was stained with blood.

Evidently Pesita had met with resistance. There was much voluble chattering on the part of those who had remained behind in their endeavors to extract from their returning comrades the details of the day's enterprise. By piecing together the various scraps of conversation he could understand Billy discovered that Pesita had ridden far to demand tribute from a wealthy ranchero, only to find that word of his coming had preceded him and brought a large detachment of Villa's regulars who concealed themselves about the house and outbuildings until Pesita and his entire force were well within close range.

"We were lucky to get off as well as we did," said an officer.

Billy grinned inwardly as he thought of the pleasant frame of mind in which Pesita might now be expected to receive the news that eight of his troopers had been killed and his two "guests" safely removed from the sphere of his hospitality.

And even as his mind dwelt delightedly upon the subject a ragged Indian carrying a carbine and with heavy silver spurs strapped to his bare feet approached and saluted him.

"General Pesita wishes Senor Capitan Byrne to report to him at once," said the man.

"Sure Mike!" replied Billy, and made his way through the pandemonium of the camp toward the headquarters tent.

As he went he slipped his hand inside his shirt and loosened something which hung beneath his left arm.

"Li'l ol' ace-in-the-hole," he murmured affectionately.

He found Pesita pacing back and forth before his tent--an energetic bundle of nerves which no amount of hard riding and fighting could tire or discourage.

As Billy approached Pesita shot a quick glance at his face, that he might read, perhaps, in his new officer's expression whether anger or suspicion had been aroused by the killing of his American friend, for Pesita never dreamed but that Bridge had been dead since mid-forenoon.

"Well," said Pesita, smiling, "you left Senor Bridge and Miguel safely at their destination?"

"I couldn't take 'em all the way," replied Billy, "cause I didn't have no more men to guard 'em with; but I seen 'em past the danger I guess an' well on their way."

"You had no men?" questioned Pesita. "You had six troopers."

"Oh, they was all croaked before we'd been gone two hours. You see it happens like this: We got as far as that dry arroyo just before the trail drops down into the valley, when up jumps a bunch of this here Villa's guys and commenced takin' pot shots at us.

"Seein' as how I was sent to guard Bridge an' Mig, I makes them dismount and hunt cover, and then me an' my men wades in and cleans up the bunch. They was only a few of them but they croaked the whole bloomin' six o' mine.

"I tell you it was some scrap while it lasted; but I saved your guests from gettin' hurted an' I know that that's what you sent me to do. It's too bad about the six men we lost but, leave it to me, we'll get even with that Villa guy yet. Just lead me to 'im."

As he spoke Billy commenced scratching himself beneath the left arm, and then, as though to better reach the point of irritation, he slipped his hand inside his shirt. If Pesita noticed the apparently innocent little act, or interpreted it correctly may or may not have been the fact. He stood looking straight into Byrne's eyes for a full minute. His face denoted neither baffled rage nor contemplated revenge. Presently a slow smile raised his heavy mustache and revealed his strong, white teeth.

"You have done well, Captain Byrne," he said. "You are a man after my own heart," and he extended his hand.

A half-hour later Billy walked slowly back to his own blankets, and to say that he was puzzled would scarce have described his mental state.

"I can't quite make that gink out," he mused. "Either he's a mighty good loser or else he's a deep one who'll wait a year to get me the way he wants to get me."

And Pesita a few moments later was saying to Captain Rozales:

"I should have shot him if I could spare such a man; but it is seldom I find one with the courage and effrontery he possesses. Why think of it, Rozales, he kills eight of my men, and lets my prisoners escape, and then dares to come back and tell me about it when he might easily have gotten away. Villa would have made him an officer for this thing, and Miguel must have told him so. He found out in some way about your little plan and he turned the tables on us. We can use him, Rozales, but we must watch him. Also, my dear captain, watch his right hand and when he slips it into his shirt be careful that you do not draw on him--unless you happen to be behind him."

Rozales was not inclined to take his chief's view of Byrne's value to them. He argued that the man was guilty of disloyalty and therefore a menace. What he thought, but did not advance as an argument, was of a different nature. Rozales was filled with rage to think that the newcomer had outwitted him, and beaten him at his own game, and he was jealous, too, of the man's ascendancy in the esteem of Pesita; but he hid his personal feelings beneath a cloak of seeming acquiescence in his chief's views, knowing that some day his time would come when he might rid himself of the danger of this obnoxious rival.

"And tomorrow," continued Pesita, "I am sending him to Cuivaca. Villa has considerable funds in bank there, and this stranger can learn what I want to know about the size of the detachment holding the town, and the habits of the garrison."