

CHAPTER X. BILLY CRACKS A SAFE

BILLY BYRNE, captain, rode into Cuivaca from the south. He had made a wide detour in order to accomplish this; but under the circumstances he had thought it wise to do so. In his pocket was a safe conduct from one of Villa's generals farther south--a safe conduct taken by Pesita from the body of one of his recent victims. It would explain Billy's presence in Cuivaca since it had been intended to carry its rightful possessor to Juarez and across the border into the United States.

He found the military establishment at Cuivaca small and ill commanded. There were soldiers upon the streets; but the only regularly detailed guard was stationed in front of the bank. No one questioned Billy. He did not have to show his safeconduct.

"This looks easy," thought Billy. "A reg'lar skinch."

He first attended to his horse, turning him into a public corral, and then sauntered up the street to the bank, which he entered, still unquestioned. Inside he changed a bill of large denomination which Pesita had given him for the purpose of an excuse to examine the lay of the bank from the inside. Billy took a long time to count the change. All the time his eyes wandered about the interior while he made mental notes of such salient features as might prove of moment to him later. The money counted Billy slowly rolled a cigarette.

He saw that the bank was roughly divided into two sections by a wire and wood partition. On one side were the customers, on the other the clerks and a teller. The latter sat behind a small wicket through which he received deposits and cashed checks. Back of him, against the wall, stood a large safe of American manufacture. Billy had had business before with similar safes. A doorway in the rear wall led into the yard behind the building. It was closed by a heavy door covered with sheet iron and fastened by several bolts and a thick, strong bar. There were no windows in the rear wall. From that side the bank appeared almost impregnable to silent assault.

Inside everything was primitive and Billy found himself wondering how a week passed without seeing a bank robbery in the town. Possibly the strong rear defenses and the armed guard in front accounted for it.

Satisfied with what he had learned he passed out onto the sidewalk and crossed the street to a saloon. Some soldiers and citizens were drinking at little tables in

front of the bar. A couple of card games were in progress, and through the open rear doorway Billy saw a little gathering encircling a cock fight.

In none of these things was Billy interested. What he had wished in entering the saloon was merely an excuse to place himself upon the opposite side of the street from the bank that he might inspect the front from the outside without arousing suspicion.

Having purchased and drunk a bottle of poor beer, the temperature of which had probably never been below eighty since it left the bottling department of the Texas brewery which inflicted it upon the ignorant, he sauntered to the front window and looked out.

There he saw that the bank building was a two-story affair, the entrance to the second story being at the left side of the first floor, opening directly onto the sidewalk in full view of the sentry who paced to and fro before the structure.

Billy wondered what the second floor was utilized for. He saw soiled hangings at the windows which aroused a hope and a sudden inspiration. There was a sign above the entrance to the second floor; but Billy's knowledge of the language had not progressed sufficiently to permit him to translate it, although he had his suspicions as to its meaning. He would learn if his guess was correct.

Returning to the bar he ordered another bottle of beer, and as he drank it he practiced upon the bartender some of his recently acquired Spanish and learned, though not without considerable difficulty, that he might find lodgings for the night upon the second floor of the bank building.

Much elated, Billy left the saloon and walked along the street until he came to the one general store of the town. After another heart rending scrimmage with the language of Ferdinand and Isabella he succeeded in making several purchases-- two heavy sacks, a brace, two bits, and a keyhole saw. Placing the tools in one of the sacks he wrapped the whole in the second sack and made his way back to the bank building.

Upon the second floor he found the proprietor of the rooming-house and engaged a room in the rear of the building, overlooking the yard. The layout was eminently satisfactory to Captain Byrne and it was with a feeling of great self-satisfaction that he descended and sought a restaurant.

He had been sent by Pesita merely to look over the ground and the defenses of the town, that the outlaw might later ride in with his entire force and loot the bank; but Billy Byrne, out of his past experience in such matters, had evolved a much simpler plan for separating the enemy from his wealth.

Having eaten, Billy returned to his room. It was now dark and the bank closed and unlighted showed that all had left it. Only the sentry paced up and down the sidewalk in front.

Going at once to his room Billy withdrew his tools from their hiding place beneath the mattress, and a moment later was busily engaged in boring holes through the floor at the foot of his bed. For an hour he worked, cautiously and quietly, until he had a rough circle of holes enclosing a space about two feet in diameter. Then he laid aside the brace and bit, and took the keyhole saw, with which he patiently sawed through the wood between contiguous holes, until, the circle completed, he lifted out a section of the floor leaving an aperture large enough to permit him to squeeze his body through when the time arrived for him to pass into the bank beneath.

While Billy had worked three men had ridden into Cuivaca. They were Tony, Benito, and the new bookkeeper of El Orobo Rancho. The Mexicans, after eating, repaired at once to the joys of the cantina; while Bridge sought a room in the building to which his escort directed him.

As chance would have it, it was the same building in which Billy labored and the room lay upon the rear side of it overlooking the same yard. But Bridge did not lie awake to inspect his surroundings. For years he had not ridden as many miles as he had during the past two days, so that long unused muscles cried out for rest and relaxation. As a result, Bridge was asleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow, and so profound was his slumber that it seemed that nothing short of a convulsion of nature would arouse him.

As Bridge lay down upon his bed Billy Byrne left his room and descended to the street. The sentry before the bank paid no attention to him, and Billy passed along, unhindered, to the corral where he had left his horse. Here, as he was saddling the animal, he was accosted, much to his disgust, by the proprietor.

In broken English the man expressed surprise that Billy rode out so late at night, and the American thought that he detected something more than curiosity in the other's manner and tone--suspicion of the strange gringo.

It would never do to leave the fellow in that state of mind, and so Billy leaned close to the other's ear, and with a broad grin and a wink whispered: "Senorita," and jerked his thumb toward the south. "I'll be back by mornin'," he added.

The Mexican's manner altered at once. He laughed and nodded, knowingly, and poked Billy in the ribs. Then he watched him mount and ride out of the corral toward the south--which was also in the direction of the bank, to the rear of which Billy rode without effort to conceal his movements.

There he dismounted and left his horse standing with the bridle reins dragging upon the ground, while he removed the lariat from the pommel of the saddle, and, stuffing it inside his shirt, walked back to the street on which the building stood, and so made his way past the sentry and to his room.

Here he pushed back the bed which he had drawn over the hole in the floor, dropped his two sacks through into the bank, and tying the brace to one end of the lariat lowered it through after the sacks.

Looping the middle of the lariat over a bedpost Billy grasped both strands firmly and lowered himself through the aperture into the room beneath. He made no more noise in his descent than he had made upon other similar occasions in his past life when he had practiced the gentle art of porch-climbing along Ashland Avenue and Washington Boulevard.

Having gained the floor he pulled upon one end of the lariat until he had drawn it free of the bedpost above, when it fell into his waiting hands. Coiling it carefully Billy placed it around his neck and under one arm. Billy, acting as a professional, was a careful and methodical man. He always saw that every little detail was properly attended to before he went on to the next phase of his endeavors. Because of this ingrained caution Billy had long since secured the tops of the two sacks together, leaving only a sufficient opening to permit of their each being filled without delay or inconvenience.

Now he turned his attention to the rear door. The bar and bolts were easily shot from their seats from the inside, and Billy saw to it that this was attended to before he went further with his labors. It were well to have one's retreat assured at the earliest possible moment. A single bolt Billy left in place that he might not be surprised by an intruder; but first he had tested it and discovered that it could be drawn with ease.

These matters satisfactorily attended to Billy assaulted the combination knob of the safe with the metal bit which he had inserted in the brace before lowering it into the bank.

The work was hard and progressed slowly. It was necessary to withdraw the bit often and lubricate it with a piece of soap which Billy had brought along in his pocket for the purpose; but eventually a hole was bored through into the tumblers of the combination lock.

From without Billy could hear the footsteps of the sentry pacing back and forth within fifty feet of him, all unconscious that the bank he was guarding was being looted almost beneath his eyes. Once a corporal came with another soldier and

relieved the sentry. After that Billy heard the footfalls no longer, for the new sentry was barefoot.

The boring finished, Billy drew a bit of wire from an inside pocket and inserted it in the hole. Then, working the wire with accustomed fingers, he turned the combination knob this way and that, feeling with the bit of wire until the tumblers should all be in line.

This, too, was slow work; but it was infinitely less liable to attract attention than any other method of safe cracking with which Billy was familiar.

It was long past midnight when Captain Byrne was rewarded with success--the tumblers clicked into position, the handle of the safe door turned and the bolts slipped back.

To swing open the door and transfer the contents of the safe to the two sacks was the work of but a few minutes. As Billy rose and threw the heavy burden across a shoulder he heard a challenge from without, and then a parley. Immediately after the sound of footsteps ascending the stairway to the rooming-house came plainly to his ears, and then he had slipped the last bolt upon the rear door and was out in the yard beyond.

Now Bridge, sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion that the boom of a cannon might not have disturbed, did that inexplicable thing which every one of us has done a hundred times in our lives. He awakened, with a start, out of a sound sleep, though no disturbing noise had reached his ears.

Something impelled him to sit up in bed, and as he did so he could see through the window beside him into the yard at the rear of the building. There in the moonlight he saw a man throwing a sack across the horn of a saddle. He saw the man mount, and he saw him wheel his horse around about and ride away toward the north. There seemed to Bridge nothing unusual about the man's act, nor had there been any indication either of stealth or haste to arouse the American's suspicions. Bridge lay back again upon his pillows and sought to woo the slumber which the sudden awakening seemed to have banished for the remainder of the night.

And up the stairway to the second floor staggered Tony and Benito. Their money was gone; but they had acquired something else which appeared much more difficult to carry and not so easily gotten rid of.

Tony held the key to their room. It was the second room upon the right of the hall. Tony remembered that very distinctly. He had impressed it upon his mind

before leaving the room earlier in the evening, for Tony had feared some such contingency as that which had befallen.

Tony fumbled with the handle of a door, and stabbed vainly at an elusive keyhole.

"Wait," mumbled Benito. "This is not the room. It was the second door from the stairway. This is the third."

Tony lurched about and staggered back. Tony reasoned: "If that was the third door the next behind me must be the second, and on the right;" but Tony took not into consideration that he had reversed the direction of his erratic wobbling. He lunged across the hall--not because he wished to but because the spirits moved him. He came in contact with a door. "This, then, must be the second door," he soliloquized, "and it is upon my right. Ah, Benito, this is the room!"

Benito was skeptical. He said as much; but Tony was obdurate. Did he not know a second door when he saw one? Was he, furthermore, not a grown man and therefore entirely capable of distinguishing between his left hand and his right? Yes! Tony was all of that, and more, so Tony inserted the key in the lock--it would have turned any lock upon the second floor--and, lo! the door swung inward upon its hinges.

"Ah! Benito," cried Tony. "Did I not tell you so? See! This is our room, for the key opens the door."

The room was dark. Tony, carried forward by the weight of his head, which had long since grown unaccountably heavy, rushed his feet rapidly forward that he might keep them within a few inches of his center of equilibrium.

The distance which it took his feet to catch up with his head was equal to the distance between the doorway and the foot of the bed, and when Tony reached that spot, with Benito meandering after him, the latter, much to his astonishment, saw in the diffused moonlight which pervaded the room, the miraculous disappearance of his former enemy and erstwhile friend. Then from the depths below came a wild scream and a heavy thud.

The sentry upon the beat before the bank heard both. For an instant he stood motionless, then he called aloud for the guard, and turned toward the bank door. But this was locked and he could but peer in through the windows. Seeing a dark form within, and being a Mexican he raised his rifle and fired through the glass of the doors.

Tony, who had dropped through the hole which Billy had used so quietly, heard the zing of a bullet pass his head, and the impact as it splashed into the adobe

wall behind him. With a second yell Tony dodged behind the safe and besought Mary to protect him.

From above Benito peered through the hole into the blackness below. Down the hall came the barefoot landlord, awakened by the screams and the shot. Behind him came Bridge, buckling his revolver belt about his hips as he ran. Not having been furnished with pajamas Bridge had not thought it necessary to remove his clothing, and so he had lost no time in dressing.

When the two, now joined by Benito, reached the street they found the guard there, battering in the bank doors. Benito, fearing for the life of Tony, which if anyone took should be taken by him, rushed upon the sergeant of the guard, explaining with both lips and hands the remarkable accident which had precipitated Tony into the bank.

The sergeant listened, though he did not believe, and when the doors had fallen in, he commanded Tony to come out with his hands above his head. Then followed an investigation which disclosed the looting of the safe, and the great hole in the ceiling through which Tony had tumbled.

The bank president came while the sergeant and the landlord were in Billy's room investigating. Bridge had followed them.

"It was the gringo," cried the excited Boniface. "This is his room. He has cut a hole in my floor which I shall have to pay to have repaired."

A captain came next, sleepy-eyed and profane. When he heard what had happened and that the wealth which he had been detailed to guard had been taken while he slept, he tore his hair and promised that the sentry should be shot at dawn.

By the time they had returned to the street all the male population of Cuivaca was there and most of the female.

"One-thousand dollars," cried the bank president, "to the man who stops the thief and returns to me what the villain has stolen."

A detachment of soldiers was in the saddle and passing the bank as the offer was made.

"Which way did he go?" asked the captain. "Did no one see him leave?"

Bridge was upon the point of saying that he had seen him and that he had ridden north, when it occurred to him that a thousand dollars--even a thousand dollars

Mex--was a great deal of money, and that it would carry both himself and Billy to Rio and leave something for pleasure beside.

Then up spoke a tall, thin man with the skin of a coffee bean.

"I saw him, Senor Capitan," he cried. "He kept his horse in my corral, and at night he came and took it out saying that he was riding to visit a senorita. He fooled me, the scoundrel; but I will tell you--he rode south. I saw him ride south with my own eyes."

"Then we shall have him before morning," cried the captain, "for there is but one place to the south where a robber would ride, and he has not had sufficient start of us that he can reach safety before we overhaul him. Forward! March!" and the detachment moved down the narrow street. "Trot! March!" And as they passed the store: "Gallop! March!"

Bridge almost ran the length of the street to the corral. His pony must be rested by now, and a few miles to the north the gringo whose capture meant a thousand dollars to Bridge was on the road to liberty.

"I hate to do it," thought Bridge; "because, even if he is a bank robber, he's an American; but I need the money and in all probability the fellow is a scoundrel who should have been hanged long ago."

Over the trail to the north rode Captain Billy Byrne, secure in the belief that no pursuit would develop until after the opening hour of the bank in the morning, by which time he would be halfway on his return journey to Pesita's camp.

"Ol' man Pesita'll be some surprised when I show him what I got for him," mused Billy. "Say!" he exclaimed suddenly and aloud, "Why the devil should I take all this swag back to that yellow-faced yegg? Who pulled this thing off anyway? Why me, of course, and does anybody think Billy Byrne's boob enough to split with a guy that didn't have a hand in it at all. Split! Why the nut'll take it all!

"Nix! Me for the border. I couldn't do a thing with all this coin down in Rio, an' Bridgie'll be along there most any time. We can hit it up some in lil' ol' Rio on this bunch o' dough. Why, say kid, there must be a million here, from the weight of it."

A frown suddenly clouded his face. "Why did I take it?" he asked himself. "Was I crackin' a safe, or was I pullin' off something fine fer poor, bleedin' Mexico? If I was a-doin' that they ain't nothin' criminal in what I done--except to the guy that owned the coin. If I was just plain crackin' a safe on my own hook why then I'm a crook again an' I can't be that--no, not with that face of yours standin' out there

so plain right in front of me, just as though you were there yourself, askin' me to remember an' be decent. God! Barbara--why wasn't I born for the likes of you, and not just a measly, ornery mucker like I am. Oh, hell! what is that that Bridge sings of Knibbs's:

There ain't no sweet Penelope somewhere that's longing much for me, But I can smell the blundering sea, and hear the rigging hum; And I can hear the whispering lips that fly before the out-bound ships, And I can hear the breakers on the sand a-calling "Come!"

Billy took off his hat and scratched his head.

"Funny," he thought, "how a girl and poetry can get a tough nut like me. I wonder what the guys that used to hang out in back of Kelly's 'ud say if they seen what was goin' on in my bean just now. They'd call me Lizzy, eh? Well, they wouldn't call me Lizzy more'n once. I may be gettin' soft in the head, but I'm all to the good with my dukes."

Speed is not conducive to sentimental thoughts and so Billy had unconsciously permitted his pony to drop into a lazy walk. There was no need for haste anyhow. No one knew yet that the bank had been robbed, or at least so Billy argued. He might, however, have thought differently upon the subject of haste could he have had a glimpse of the horseman in his rear--two miles behind him, now, but rapidly closing up the distance at a keen gallop, while he strained his eyes across the moonlit flat ahead in eager search for his quarry.

So absorbed was Billy Byrne in his reflections that his ears were deaf to the pounding of the hoofs of the pursuer's horse upon the soft dust of the dry road until Bridge was little more than a hundred yards from him. For the last half-mile Bridge had had the figure of the fugitive in full view and his mind had been playing rapidly with seductive visions of the one-thousand dollars reward--one-thousand dollars Mex, perhaps, but still quite enough to excite pleasant thoughts. At the first glimpse of the horseman ahead Bridge had reined his mount down to a trot that the noise of his approach might thereby be lessened. He had drawn his revolver from its holster, and was upon the point of putting spurs to his horse for a sudden dash upon the fugitive when the man ahead, finally attracted by the noise of the other's approach, turned in his saddle and saw him.

Neither recognized the other, and at Bridge's command of, "Hands up!" Billy, lightning-like in his quickness, drew and fired. The bullet raked Bridge's hat from his head but left him unscathed.

Billy had wheeled his pony around until he stood broadside toward Bridge. The latter fired scarce a second after Billy's shot had pinged so perilously close--fired at a perfect target but fifty yards away.

At the sound of the report the robber's horse reared and plunged, then, wheeling and tottering high upon its hind feet, fell backward. Billy, realizing that his mount had been hit, tried to throw himself from the saddle; but until the very moment that the beast toppled over the man was held by his cartridge belt which, as the animal first lunged, had caught over the high horn of the Mexican saddle.

The belt slipped from the horn as the horse was falling, and Billy succeeded in throwing himself a little to one side. One leg, however, was pinned beneath the animal's body and the force of the fall jarred the revolver from Billy's hand to drop just beyond his reach.

His carbine was in its boot at the horse's side, and the animal was lying upon it. Instantly Bridge rode to his side and covered him with his revolver.

"Don't move," he commanded, "or I'll be under the painful necessity of terminating your earthly endeavors right here and now."

"Well, for the love o' Mike!" cried the fallen bandit. "You?"

Bridge was off his horse the instant that the familiar voice sounded in his ears.

"Billy!" he exclaimed. "Why--Billy--was it you who robbed the bank?"

Even as he spoke Bridge was busy easing the weight of the dead pony from Billy's leg.

"Anything broken?" he asked as the bandit struggled to free himself.

"Not so you could notice it," replied Billy, and a moment later he was on his feet. "Say, bo," he added, "it's a mighty good thing you dropped little pinto here, for I'd a sure got you my next shot. Gee! it makes me sweat to think of it. But about this bank robbin' business. You can't exactly say that I robbed a bank. That money was the enemy's resources, an' I just nicked their resources. That's war. That ain't robbery. I ain't takin' it for myself--it's for the cause--the cause o' poor, bleedin' Mexico," and Billy grinned a large grin.

"You took it for Pesita?" asked Bridge.

"Of course," replied Billy. "I won't get a jitney of it. I wouldn't take none of it, Bridge, honest. I'm on the square now."

"I know you are, Billy," replied the other; "but if you're caught you might find it difficult to convince the authorities of your highmindedness and your disinterestedness."

"Authorities!" scoffed Billy. "There ain't no authorities in Mexico. One bandit is just as good as another, and from Pesita to Carranza they're all bandits at heart. They ain't a one of 'em that gives two whoops in hell for poor, bleedin' Mexico--unless they can do the bleedin' themselves. It's dog eat dog here. If they caught me they'd shoot me whether I'd robbed their bank or not. What's that?" Billy was suddenly alert, straining his eyes back in the direction of Cuivaca.

"They're coming, Billy," said Bridge. "Take my horse--quick! You must get out of here in a hurry. The whole post is searching for you. I thought that they went toward the south, though. Some of them must have circled."

"What'll you do if I take your horse?" asked Billy.

"I can walk back," said Bridge, "it isn't far to town. I'll tell them that I had come only a short distance when my horse threw me and ran away. They'll believe it for they think I'm a rotten horseman--the two vaqueros who escorted me to town I mean."

Billy hesitated. "I hate to do it, Bridge," he said.

"You must, Billy," urged the other.

"If they find us here together it'll merely mean that the two of us will get it, for I'll stick with you, Billy, and we can't fight off a whole troop of cavalry out here in the open. If you take my horse we can both get out of it, and later I'll see you in Rio. Good-bye, Billy, I'm off for town," and Bridge turned and started back along the road on foot.

Billy watched him in silence for a moment. The truth of Bridge's statement of fact was so apparent that Billy was forced to accept the plan. A moment later he transferred the bags of loot to Bridge's pony, swung into the saddle, and took a last backward look at the diminishing figure of the man swinging along in the direction of Cuivaca.

"Say," he muttered to himself; "but you're a right one, bo," and wheeling to the north he clapped his spurs to his new mount and loped easily off into the night.