

CHAPTER XI. BARBARA RELEASES A CONSPIRATOR

IT was a week later, yet Grayson still was growling about the loss of "that there Brazos pony." Grayson, the boss, and the boss's daughter were sitting upon the veranda of the ranchhouse when the foreman reverted to the subject.

"I knew I didn't have no business hirin' a man thet can't ride," he said. "Why thet there Brazos pony never did stumble, an' if he'd of stumbled he'd a-stood aroun' a year waitin' to be caught up agin. I jest cain't figger it out no ways how thet there tenderfoot bookkeeper lost him. He must a-shooed him away with a stick. An' saddle an' bridle an' all gone too. Doggone it!"

"I'm the one who should be peeved," spoke up the girl with a wry smile. "Brazos was my pony. He's the one you picked out for me to ride while I am here; but I am sure poor Mr. Bridge feels as badly about it as anyone, and I know that he couldn't help it. We shouldn't be too hard on him. We might just as well attempt to hold him responsible for the looting of the bank and the loss of the pay-roll money."

"Well," said Grayson, "I give him thet horse 'cause I knew he couldn't ride, an' thet was the safest horse in the cavy. I wisht I'd given him Santa Anna instid--I wouldn't a-minded losin' him. There won't no one ride him anyhow he's thet ornery."

"The thing that surprises me most," remarked the boss, "is that Brazos doesn't come back. He was foaled on this range, and he's never been ridden anywhere else, has he?"

"He was foaled right here on this ranch," Grayson corrected him, "and he ain't never been more'n a hundred mile from it. If he ain't dead or stolen he'd a-ben back afore the bookkeeper was. It's almighty queer."

"What sort of bookkeeper is Mr. Bridge?" asked the girl.

"Oh, he's all right I guess," replied Grayson grudgingly. "A feller's got to be some good at something. He's probably one of these here paper-collar, cracker-fed college dudes thet don't know nothin' else 'cept writin' in books."

The girl rose, smiled, and moved away.

"I like Mr. Bridge, anyhow," she called back over her shoulder, "for whatever he may not be he is certainly a well-bred gentleman," which speech did not tend to raise Mr. Bridge in the estimation of the hard-fisted ranch foreman.

"Funny them greasers don't come in from the north range with that bunch o' steers. They ben gone all day now," he said to the boss, ignoring the girl's parting sally.

Bridge sat tip-tilted against the front of the office building reading an ancient magazine which he had found within. His day's work was done and he was but waiting for the gong that would call him to the evening meal with the other employees of the ranch. The magazine failed to rouse his interest. He let it drop idly to his knees and with eyes closed reverted to his never-failing source of entertainment.

And then that slim, poetic guy he turned and looked me in the eye, "...It's overland and overland and overseas to--where?" "Most anywhere that isn't here," I says. His face went kind of queer. "The place we're in is always here. The other place is there."

Bridge stretched luxuriously. "There," he repeated. "I've been searching for THERE for many years; but for some reason I can never get away from HERE. About two weeks of any place on earth and that place is just plain HERE to me, and I'm longing once again for THERE."

His musings were interrupted by a sweet feminine voice close by. Bridge did not open his eyes at once--he just sat there, listening.

As I was hiking past the woods, the cool and sleepy summer woods, I saw a guy a-talking to the sunshine in the air, Thinks I, "He's going to have a fit--I'll stick around and watch a bit," But he paid no attention, hardly knowing I was there.

Then the girl broke into a merry laugh and Bridge opened his eyes and came to his feet.

"I didn't know you cared for that sort of stuff," he said. "Knibbs writes man-verse. I shouldn't have imagined that it would appeal to a young lady."

"But it does, though," she replied; "at least to me. There's a swing to it and a freedom that 'gets me in the eye.'"

Again she laughed, and when this girl laughed, harder-headed and much older men than Mr. L. Bridge felt strange emotions move within their breasts.

For a week Barbara had seen a great deal of the new bookkeeper. Aside from her father he was the only man of culture and refinement of which the rancho could boast, or, as the rancho would have put it, be ashamed of.

She had often sought the veranda of the little office and lured the new bookkeeper from his work, and on several occasions had had him at the ranchhouse. Not only was he an interesting talker; but there was an element of mystery about him which appealed to the girl's sense of romance.

She knew that he was a gentleman born and reared, and she often found herself wondering what tragic train of circumstances had set him adrift among the flotsam of humanity's wreckage. Too, the same persistent conviction that she had known him somewhere in the past that possessed her father clung to her mind; but she could not place him.

"I overheard your dissertation on HERE AND THERE," said the girl. "I could not very well help it--it would have been rude to interrupt a conversation." Her eyes sparkled mischievously and her cheeks dimpled.

"You wouldn't have been interrupting a conversation," objected Bridge, smiling; "you would have been turning a monologue into a conversation."

"But it was a conversation," insisted the girl. "The wanderer was conversing with the bookkeeper. You are a victim of wanderlust, Mr. L. Bridge--don't deny it. You hate bookkeeping, or any other such prosaic vocation as requires permanent residence in one place."

"Come now," expostulated the man. "That is hardly fair. Haven't I been here a whole week?"

They both laughed.

"What in the world can have induced you to remain so long?" cried Barbara. "How very much like an old timer you must feel--one of the oldest inhabitants."

"I am a regular aborigine," declared Bridge; but his heart would have chosen another reply. It would have been glad to tell the girl that there was a very real and a very growing inducement to remain at El Orobo Rancho. The man was too self-controlled, however, to give way to the impulses of his heart.

At first he had just liked the girl, and been immensely glad of her companionship because there was so much that was common to them both--a love for good music, good pictures, and good literature--things Bridge hadn't had an opportunity to discuss with another for a long, long time.

And slowly he had found delight in just sitting and looking at her. He was experienced enough to realize that this was a dangerous symptom, and so from the moment he had been forced to acknowledge it to himself he had been very careful to guard his speech and his manner in the girl's presence.

He found pleasure in dreaming of what might have been as he sat watching the girl's changing expression as different moods possessed her; but as for permitting a hope, even, of realization of his dreams--ah, he was far too practical for that, dreamer though he was.

As the two talked Grayson passed. His rather stern face clouded as he saw the girl and the new bookkeeper laughing there together.

"Ain't you got nothin' to do?" he asked Bridge.

"Yes, indeed," replied the latter.

"Then why don't you do it?" snapped Grayson.

"I am," said Bridge.

"Mr. Bridge is entertaining me," interrupted the girl, before Grayson could make any rejoinder. "It is my fault--I took him from his work. You don't mind, do you, Mr. Grayson?"

Grayson mumbled an inarticulate reply and went his way.

"Mr. Grayson does not seem particularly enthusiastic about me," laughed Bridge.

"No," replied the girl, candidly; "but I think it's just because you can't ride."

"Can't ride!" ejaculated Bridge. "Why, haven't I been riding ever since I came here?"

"Mr. Grayson doesn't consider anything in the way of equestrianism riding unless the ridden is perpetually seeking the life of the rider," explained Barbara. "Just at present he is terribly put out because you lost Brazos. He says Brazos never stumbled in his life, and even if you had fallen from his back he would have stood beside you waiting for you to remount him. You see he was the kindest horse on the ranch--especially picked for me to ride. However in the world DID you lose him, Mr. Bridge?"

The girl was looking full at the man as she propounded her query. Bridge was silent. A faint flush overspread his face. He had not before known that the horse was hers. He couldn't very well tell her the truth, and he wouldn't lie to her, so he made no reply.

Barbara saw the flush and noted the man's silence. For the first time her suspicions were aroused, yet she would not believe that this gentle, amiable drifter could be guilty of any crime greater than negligence or carelessness. But

why his evident embarrassment now? The girl was mystified. For a moment or two they sat in silence, then Barbara rose.

"I must run along back now," she explained. "Papa will be wondering what has become of me."

"Yes," said Bridge, and let her go. He would have been glad to tell her the truth; but he couldn't do that without betraying Billy. He had heard enough to know that Francisco Villa had been so angered over the bold looting of the bank in the face of a company of his own soldiers that he would stop at nothing to secure the person of the thief once his identity was known. Bridge was perfectly satisfied with the ethics of his own act on the night of the bank robbery. He knew that the girl would have applauded him, and that Grayson himself would have done what Bridge did had a like emergency confronted the ranch foreman; but to have admitted complicity in the escape of the fugitive would have been to have exposed himself to the wrath of Villa, and at the same time revealed the identity of the thief. "Nor," thought Bridge, "would it get Brazos back for Barbara."

It was after dark when the vaqueros Grayson had sent to the north range returned to the ranch. They came empty-handed and slowly for one of them supported a wounded comrade on the saddle before him. They rode directly to the office where Grayson and Bridge were going over some of the business of the day, and when the former saw them his brow clouded for he knew before he heard their story what had happened.

"Who done it?" he asked, as the men filed into the office, half carrying the wounded man.

"Some of Pesita's followers," replied Benito.

"Did they git the steers, too?" inquired Grayson.

"Part of them--we drove off most and scattered them. We saw the Brazos pony, too," and Benito looked from beneath heavy lashes in the direction of the bookkeeper.

"Where?" asked Grayson.

"One of Pesita's officers rode him--an Americano. Tony and I saw this same man in Cuivaca the night the bank was robbed, and today he was riding the Brazos pony." Again the dark eyes turned toward Bridge.

Grayson was quick to catch the significance of the Mexican's meaning. The more so as it was directly in line with suspicions which he himself had been nursing since the robbery.

During the colloquy the boss entered the office. He had heard the returning vaqueros ride into the ranch and noting that they brought no steers with them had come to the office to hear their story. Barbara, spurred by curiosity, accompanied her father.

"You heard what Benito says?" asked Grayson, turning toward his employer.

The latter nodded. All eyes were upon Bridge.

"Well," snapped Grayson, "what you gotta say fer yourself? I ben suspectin' you right along. I knew derned well that that there Brazos pony never run off by hisself. You an' that other crook from the States framed this whole thing up pretty slick, didn'tcha? Well, we'll--"

"Wait a moment, wait a moment, Grayson," interrupted the boss. "Give Mr. Bridge a chance to explain. You're making a rather serious charge against him without any particularly strong proof to back your accusation."

"Oh, that's all right," exclaimed Bridge, with a smile. "I have known that Mr. Grayson suspected me of implication in the robbery; but who can blame him--a man who can't ride might be guilty of almost anything."

Grayson sniffed. Barbara took a step nearer Bridge. She had been ready to doubt him herself only an hour or so ago; but that was before he had been accused. Now that she found others arrayed against him her impulse was to come to his defense.

"You didn't do it, did you, Mr. Bridge?" Her tone was almost pleading.

"If you mean robbing the bank," he replied; "I did not, Miss Barbara. I knew no more about it until after it was over than Benito or Tony--in fact they were the ones who discovered it while I was still asleep in my room above the bank."

"Well, how did the robber git that there Brazos pony then?" demanded Grayson savagely. "Thet's what I want to know."

"You'll have to ask him, Mr. Grayson," replied Bridge.

"Villa'll ask him, when he gits holt of him," snapped Grayson; "but I reckon he'll git all the information out of you that he wants first. He'll be in Cuivaca tomorrer, an' so will you."

"You mean that you are going to turn me over to General Villa?" asked Bridge. "You are going to turn an American over to that butcher knowing that he'll be shot inside of twenty-four hours?"

"Shootin's too damned good fer a horse thief," replied Grayson.

Barbara turned impulsively toward her father. "You won't let Mr. Grayson do that?" she asked.

"Mr. Grayson knows best how to handle such an affair as this, Barbara," replied her father. "He is my superintendent, and I have made it a point never to interfere with him."

"You will let Mr. Bridge be shot without making an effort to save him?" she demanded.

"We do not know that he will be shot," replied the ranch owner. "If he is innocent there is no reason why he should be punished. If he is guilty of implication in the Cuivaca bank robbery he deserves, according to the rules of war, to die, for General Villa, I am told, considers that a treasonable act. Some of the funds upon which his government depends for munitions of war were there--they were stolen and turned over to the enemies of Mexico."

"And if we interfere we'll turn Villa against us," interposed Grayson. "He ain't any too keen for Americans as it is. Why, if this fellow was my brother I'd hev to turn him over to the authorities."

"Well, I thank God," exclaimed Bridge fervently, "that in addition to being shot by Villa I don't have to endure the added disgrace of being related to you, and I'm not so sure that I shall be hanged by Villa," and with that he wiped the oil lamp from the table against which he had been leaning, and leaped across the room for the doorway.

Barbara and her father had been standing nearest the exit, and as the girl realized the bold break for liberty the man was making, she pushed her father to one side and threw open the door.

Bridge was through it in an instant, with a parting, "God bless you, little girl!" as he passed her. Then the door was closed with a bang. Barbara turned the key, withdrew it from the lock and threw it across the darkened room.

Grayson and the unwounded Mexicans leaped after the fugitive only to find their way barred by the locked door. Outside Bridge ran to the horses standing patiently with lowered heads awaiting the return of their masters. In an instant he was astride one of them, and lashing the others ahead of him with a quirt he spurred away into the night.

By the time Grayson and the Mexicans had wormed their way through one of the small windows of the office the new bookkeeper was beyond sight and earshot.

As the ranch foreman was saddling up with several of his men in the corral to give chase to the fugitive the boss strolled in and touched him on the arm.

"Mr. Grayson," he said, "I have made it a point never to interfere with you; but I am going to ask you now not to pursue Mr. Bridge. I shall be glad if he makes good his escape. Barbara was right--he is a fellow-American. We cannot turn him over to Villa, or any other Mexican to be murdered."

Grumbly Grayson unsaddled. "Ef you'd seen what I've seen around here," he said, "I guess you wouldn't be so keen to save this feller's hide."

"What do you mean?" asked the boss.

"I mean that he's ben tryin' to make love to your daughter."

The older man laughed. "Don't be a fool, Grayson," he said, and walked away.

An hour later Barbara was strolling up and down before the ranchhouse in the cool and refreshing air of the Chihuahua night. Her mind was occupied with disquieting reflections of the past few hours. Her pride was immeasurably hurt by the part impulse had forced her to take in the affair at the office. Not that she regretted that she had connived in the escape of Bridge; but it was humiliating that a girl of her position should have been compelled to play so melodramatic a part before Grayson and his Mexican vaqueros.

Then, too, was she disappointed in Bridge. She had looked upon him as a gentleman whom misfortune and wanderlust had reduced to the lowest stratum of society. Now she feared that he belonged to that substratum which lies below the lowest which society recognizes as a part of itself, and which is composed solely of the criminal class.

It was hard for Barbara to realize that she had associated with a thief--just for a moment it was hard, until recollection forced upon her the unwelcome fact of the status of another whom she had known--to whom she had given her love. The girl did not wince at the thought--instead she squared her shoulders and raised her chin.

"I am proud of him, whatever he may have been," she murmured; but she was not thinking of the new bookkeeper. When she did think again of Bridge it was to be glad that he had escaped--"for he is an American, like myself."

"Well!" exclaimed a voice behind her. "You played us a pretty trick, Miss Barbara."

The girl turned to see Grayson approaching. To her surprise he seemed to hold no resentment whatsoever. She greeted him courteously.

"I couldn't let you turn an American over to General Villa," she said, "no matter what he had done."

"I liked your spirit," said the man. "You're the kind o' girl I ben lookin' fer all my life--one with nerve an' grit, an' you got 'em both. You liked that bookkeepin' critter, an' he wasn't half a man. I like you an' I am a man, ef I do say so myself."

The girl drew back in astonishment.

"Mr. Grayson!" she exclaimed. "You are forgetting yourself."

"No I ain't," he cried hoarsely. "I love you an' I'm goin' to have you. You'd love me too ef you knew me better."

He took a step forward and grasped her arm, trying to draw her to him. The girl pushed him away with one hand, and with the other struck him across the face.

Grayson dropped her arm, and as he did so she drew herself to her full height and looked him straight in the eyes.

"You may go now," she said, her voice like ice. "I shall never speak of this to anyone--provided you never attempt to repeat it."

The man made no reply. The blow in the face had cooled his ardor temporarily, but had it not also served another purpose?--to crystallize it into a firm and inexorable resolve.

When he had departed Barbara turned and entered the house.