

CHAPTER XII. BILLY TO THE RESCUE

IT WAS nearly ten o'clock the following morning when Barbara, sitting upon the veranda of the ranchhouse, saw her father approaching from the direction of the office. His face wore a troubled expression which the girl could not but note.

"What's the matter, Papa?" she asked, as he sank into a chair at her side.

"Your self-sacrifice of last evening was all to no avail," he replied. "Bridge has been captured by Villistas."

"What?" cried the girl. "You can't mean it--how did you learn?"

"Grayson just had a phone message from Cuivaca," he explained. "They only repaired the line yesterday since Pesita's men cut it last month. This was our first message. And do you know, Barbara, I can't help feeling sorry. I had hoped that he would get away."

"So had I," said the girl.

Her father was eyeing her closely to note the effect of his announcement upon her; but he could see no greater concern reflected than that which he himself felt for a fellow-man and an American who was doomed to death at the hands of an alien race, far from his own land and his own people.

"Can nothing be done?" she asked.

"Absolutely," he replied with finality. "I have talked it over with Grayson and he assures me that an attempt at intervention upon our part might tend to antagonize Villa, in which case we are all as good as lost. He is none too fond of us as it is, and Grayson believes, and not without reason, that he would welcome the slightest pretext for withdrawing the protection of his favor. Instantly he did that we should become the prey of every marauding band that infests the mountains. Not only would Pesita swoop down upon us, but those companies of freebooters which acknowledge nominal loyalty to Villa would be about our ears in no time. No, dear, we may do nothing. The young man has made his bed, and now I am afraid that he will have to lie in it alone."

For awhile the girl sat in silence, and presently her father arose and entered the house. Shortly after she followed him, reappearing soon in riding togs and walking rapidly to the corrals. Here she found an American cowboy busily engaged in whittling a stick as he sat upon an upturned cracker box and shot accurate streams of tobacco juice at a couple of industrious tumble bugs that had

had the great impudence to roll their little ball of provender within the whittler's range.

"O Eddie!" she cried.

The man looked up, and was at once electrified into action. He sprang to his feet and whipped off his sombrero. A broad smile illumined his freckled face.

"Yes, miss," he answered. "What can I do for you?"

"Saddle a pony for me, Eddie," she explained. "I want to take a little ride."

"Sure!" he assured her cheerily. "Have it ready in a jiffy," and away he went, uncoiling his riata, toward the little group of saddle ponies which stood in the corral against necessity for instant use.

In a couple of minutes he came back leading one, which he tied to the corral bars.

"But I can't ride that horse," exclaimed the girl. "He bucks."

"Sure," said Eddie. "I'm a-goin' to ride him."

"Oh, are you going somewhere?" she asked.

"I'm goin' with you, miss," announced Eddie, sheepishly.

"But I didn't ask you, Eddie, and I don't want you--today," she urged.

"Sorry, miss," he threw back over his shoulder as he walked back to rope a second pony; "but them's orders. You're not to be allowed to ride no place without a escort. 'Twouldn't be safe neither, miss," he almost pleaded, "an' I won't hinder you none. I'll ride behind far enough to be there ef I'm needed."

Directly he came back with another pony, a sad-eyed, gentle-appearing little beast, and commenced saddling and bridling the two.

"Will you promise," she asked, after watching him in silence for a time, "that you will tell no one where I go or whom I see?"

"Cross my heart hope to die," he assured her.

"All right, Eddie, then I'll let you come with me, and you can ride beside me, instead of behind."

Across the flat they rode, following the windings of the river road, one mile, two, five, ten. Eddie had long since been wondering what the purpose of so steady a

pace could be. This was no pleasure ride which took the boss's daughter--"heifer," Eddie would have called her--ten miles up river at a hard trot. Eddie was worried, too. They had passed the danger line, and were well within the stamping ground of Pesita and his retainers. Here each little adobe dwelling, and they were scattered at intervals of a mile or more along the river, contained a rabid partisan of Pesita, or it contained no one--Pesita had seen to this latter condition personally.

At last the young lady drew rein before a squalid and dilapidated hut. Eddie gasped. It was Jose's, and Jose was a notorious scoundrel whom old age alone kept from the active pursuit of the only calling he ever had known--brigandage. Why should the boss's daughter come to Jose? Jose was hand in glove with every cutthroat in Chihuahua, or at least within a radius of two hundred miles of his abode.

Barbara swung herself from the saddle, and handed her bridle reins to Eddie.

"Hold him, please," she said. "I'll be gone but a moment."

"You're not goin' in there to see old Jose alone?" gasped Eddie.

"Why not?" she asked. "If you're afraid you can leave my horse and ride along home."

Eddie colored to the roots of his sandy hair, and kept silent. The girl approached the doorway of the mean hovel and peered within. At one end sat a bent old man, smoking. He looked up as Barbara's figure darkened the doorway.

"Jose!" said the girl.

The old man rose to his feet and came toward her.

"Eh? Senorita, eh?" he cackled.

"You are Jose?" she asked.

"Si, senorita," replied the old Indian. "What can poor old Jose do to serve the beautiful senorita?"

"You can carry a message to one of Pesita's officers," replied the girl. "I have heard much about you since I came to Mexico. I know that there is not another man in this part of Chihuahua who may so easily reach Pesita as you." She raised her hand for silence as the Indian would have protested. Then she reached into the pocket of her riding breeches and withdrew a handful of silver which she permitted to trickle, tinklingly, from one palm to the other. "I wish you to go to the camp of Pesita," she continued, "and carry word to the man who robbed the

bank at Cuivaca--he is an American--that his friend, Senor Bridge has been captured by Villa and is being held for execution in Cuivaca. You must go at once--you must get word to Senor Bridge's friend so that help may reach Senor Bridge before dawn. Do you understand?"

The Indian nodded assent.

"Here," said the girl, "is a payment on account. When I know that you delivered the message in time you shall have as much more. Will you do it?"

"I will try," said the Indian, and stretched forth a clawlike hand for the money.

"Good!" exclaimed Barbara. "Now start at once," and she dropped the silver coins into the old man's palm.

It was dusk when Captain Billy Byrne was summoned to the tent of Pesita. There he found a weazened, old Indian squatting at the side of the outlaw.

"Jose," said Pesita, "has word for you."

Billy Byrne turned questioningly toward the Indian.

"I have been sent, Senor Capitan," explained Jose, "by the beautiful senorita of El Orobo Rancho to tell you that your friend, Senor Bridge, has been captured by General Villa, and is being held at Cuivaca, where he will doubtless be shot--if help does not reach him before tomorrow morning."

Pesita was looking questioningly at Byrne. Since the gringo had returned from Cuivaca with the loot of the bank and turned the last penny of it over to him the outlaw had looked upon his new captain as something just short of superhuman. To have robbed the bank thus easily while Villa's soldiers paced back and forth before the doorway seemed little short of an indication of miraculous powers, while to have turned the loot over intact to his chief, not asking for so much as a peso of it, was absolutely incredible.

Pesita could not understand this man; but he admired him greatly and feared him, too. Such a man was worth a hundred of the ordinary run of humanity that enlisted beneath Pesita's banners. Byrne had but to ask a favor to have it granted, and now, when he called upon Pesita to furnish him with a suitable force for the rescue of Bridge the brigand enthusiastically acceded to his demands.

"I will come," he exclaimed, "and all my men shall ride with me. We will take Cuivaca by storm. We may even capture Villa himself."

"Wait a minute, bo," interrupted Billy Byrne. "Don't get excited. I'm lookin' to get my pal outen' Cuivaca. After that I don't care who you capture; but I'm goin' to get Bridgie out first. I ken do it with twenty-five men--if it ain't too late. Then, if you want to, you can shoot up the town. Lemme have the twenty-five, an' you hang around the edges with the rest of 'em 'til I'm done. Whaddaya say?"

Pesita was willing to agree to anything, and so it came that half an hour later Billy Byrne was leading a choice selection of some two dozen cutthroats down through the hills toward Cuivaca. While a couple of miles in the rear followed Pesita with the balance of his band.

Billy rode until the few remaining lights of Cuivaca shone but a short distance ahead and they could hear plainly the strains of a grating graphophone from beyond the open windows of a dance hall, and the voices of the sentries as they called the hour.

"Stay here," said Billy to a sergeant at his side, "until you hear a hoot owl cry three times from the direction of the barracks and guardhouse, then charge the opposite end of the town, firing off your carbines like hell an' yellin' yer heads off. Make all the racket you can, an' keep it up 'til you get 'em comin' in your direction, see? Then turn an' drop back slowly, eggin' 'em on, but holdin' 'em to it as long as you can. Do you get me, bo?"

From the mixture of Spanish and English and Granavenooish the sergeant gleaned enough of the intent of his commander to permit him to salute and admit that he understood what was required of him.

Having given his instructions Billy Byrne rode off to the west, circled Cuivaca and came close up upon the southern edge of the little village. Here he dismounted and left his horse hidden behind an outbuilding, while he crept cautiously forward to reconnoiter.

He knew that the force within the village had no reason to fear attack. Villa knew where the main bodies of his enemies lay, and that no force could approach Cuivaca without word of its coming reaching the garrison many hours in advance of the foe. That Pesita, or another of the several bandit chiefs in the neighborhood would dare descend upon a garrisoned town never for a moment entered the calculations of the rebel leader.

For these reasons Billy argued that Cuivaca would be poorly guarded. On the night he had spent there he had seen sentries before the bank, the guardhouse, and the barracks in addition to one who paced to and fro in front of the house in which the commander of the garrison maintained his headquarters. Aside from these the town was unguarded.

Nor were conditions different tonight. Billy came within a hundred yards of the guardhouse before he discovered a sentinel. The fellow lolled upon his gun in front of the building--an adobe structure in the rear of the barracks. The other three sides of the guardhouse appeared to be unwatched.

Billy threw himself upon his stomach and crawled slowly forward stopping often. The sentry seemed asleep. He did not move. Billy reached the shadow at the side of the structure and some fifty feet from the soldier without detection. Then he rose to his feet directly beneath a barred window.

Within Bridge paced back and forth the length of the little building. He could not sleep. Tomorrow he was to be shot! Bridge did not wish to die. That very morning General Villa in person had examined him. The general had been exceedingly wroth--the sting of the theft of his funds still irritated him; but he had given Bridge no inkling as to his fate. It had remained for a fellow-prisoner to do that. This man, a deserter, was to be shot, so he said, with Bridge, a fact which gave him an additional twenty-four hours of life, since, he asserted, General Villa wished to be elsewhere than in Cuivaca when an American was executed. Thus he could disclaim responsibility for the act.

The general was to depart in the morning. Shortly after, Bridge and the deserter would be led out and blindfolded before a stone wall--if there was such a thing, or a brick wall, or an adobe wall. It made little difference to the deserter, or to Bridge either. The wall was but a trivial factor. It might go far to add romance to whomever should read of the affair later; but in so far as Bridge and the deserter were concerned it meant nothing. A billboard, thought Bridge, bearing the slogan: "Eventually! Why not now?" would have been equally as efficacious and far more appropriate.

The room in which he was confined was stuffy with the odor of accumulated filth. Two small barred windows alone gave means of ventilation. He and the deserter were the only prisoners. The latter slept as soundly as though the morrow held nothing more momentous in his destiny than any of the days that had preceded it. Bridge was moved to kick the fellow into consciousness of his impending fate. Instead he walked to the south window to fill his lungs with the free air beyond his prison pen, and gaze sorrowfully at the star-lit sky which he should never again behold.

In a low tone Bridge crooned a snatch of the poem that he and Billy liked best:

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

Bridge's mental vision was concentrated upon the veranda of a white-walled ranchhouse to the east. He shook his head angrily.

"It's just as well," he thought. "She's not for me."

Something moved upon the ground beyond the window. Bridge became suddenly intent upon the thing. He saw it rise and resolve itself into the figure of a man, and then, in a low whisper, came a familiar voice:

"There ain't no roses in my hair, but there's a barker in my shirt, an' another at me side. Here's one of 'em. They got kisses beat a city block. How's the door o' this thing fastened?" The speaker was quite close to the window now, his face but a few inches from Bridge's.

"Billy!" ejaculated the condemned man.

"Surest thing you know; but about the door?"

"Just a heavy bar on the outside," replied Bridge.

"Easy," commented Billy, relieved. "Get ready to beat it when I open the door. I got a pony south o' town that'll have to carry double for a little way tonight."

"God bless you, Billy!" whispered Bridge, fervently.

"Lay low a few minutes," said Billy, and moved away toward the rear of the guardhouse.

A few minutes later there broke upon the night air the dismal hoot of an owl. At intervals of a few seconds it was repeated twice. The sentry before the guardhouse shifted his position and looked about, then he settled back, transferring his weight to the other foot, and resumed his bovine meditations.

The man at the rear of the guardhouse moved silently along the side of the structure until he stood within a few feet of the unsuspecting sentinel, hidden from him by the corner of the building. A heavy revolver dangled from his right hand. He held it loosely by the barrel, and waited.

For five minutes the silence of the night was unbroken, then from the east came a single shot, followed immediately by a scattering fusillade and a chorus of hoarse cries.

Billy Byrne smiled. The sentry resumed indications of quickness. From the barracks beyond the guardhouse came sharp commands and the sounds of men running. From the opposite end of the town the noise of battle welled up to ominous proportions.

Billy heard the soldiers stream from their quarters and a moment later saw them trot up the street at the double. Everyone was moving toward the opposite end of the town except the lone sentinel before the guardhouse. The moment seemed propitious for his attempt.

Billy peered around the corner of the guardhouse. Conditions were just as he had pictured they would be. The sentry stood gazing in the direction of the firing, his back toward the guardhouse door and Billy.

With a bound the American cleared the space between himself and the unsuspecting and unfortunate soldier. The butt of the heavy revolver fell, almost noiselessly, upon the back of the sentry's head, and the man sank to the ground without even a moan.

Turning to the door Billy knocked the bar from its place, the door swung in and Bridge slipped through to liberty.

"Quick!" said Billy. "Follow me," and turned at a rapid run toward the south edge of the town. He made no effort now to conceal his movements. Speed was the only essential, and the two covered the ground swiftly and openly without any attempt to take advantage of cover.

They reached Billy's horse unnoticed, and a moment later were trotting toward the west to circle the town and regain the trail to the north and safety.

To the east they heard the diminishing rifle fire of the combatants as Pesita's men fell steadily back before the defenders, and drew them away from Cuivaca in accordance with Billy's plan.

"Like takin' candy from a baby," said Billy, when the flickering lights of Cuivaca shone to the south of them, and the road ahead lay clear to the rendezvous of the brigands.

"Yes," agreed Bridge; "but what I'd like to know, Billy, is how you found out I was there."

"Penelope," said Byrne, laughing.

"Penelope!" queried Bridge. "I'm not at all sure that I follow you, Billy."

"Well, seein' as you're sittin' on behind you can't be leadin' me," returned Billy; "but cuttin' the kid it was a skirt tipped it off to me where you was--the beautiful senorita of El Orobo Rancho, I think Jose called her. Now are you hep?"

Bridge gave an exclamation of astonishment. "God bless her!" he said. "She did that for me?"

"She sure did," Billy assured him, "an' I'll bet an iron case she's a-waitin' for you there with buds o' roses in her hair an' kisses on her mouth, you old son-of-a-gun, you." Billy laughed happily. He was happy anyway at having rescued Bridge, and the knowledge that his friend was in love and that the girl reciprocated his affection--all of which Billy assumed as the only explanation of her interest in Bridge--only added to his joy. "She ain't a greaser is she?" he asked presently.

"I should say not," replied Bridge. "She's a perfect queen from New York City; but, Billy, she's not for me. What she did was prompted by a generous heart. She couldn't care for me, Billy. Her father is a wealthy man--he could have the pick of the land--of many lands--if she cared to marry. You don't think for a minute she'd want a hobo, do you?"

"You can't most always tell," replied Billy, a trifle sadly. "I knew such a queen once who would have chosen a mucker, if he'd a-let her. You're stuck on her, ol' man?"

"I'm afraid I am, Billy," Bridge admitted; "but what's the use? Let's forget it. Oh, say, is this the horse I let you take the night you robbed the bank?"

"Yes," said Billy; "same little pony, an' a mighty well-behaved one, too. Why?"

"It's hers," said Bridge.

"An' she wants it back?"

"She didn't say so; but I'd like to get it to her some way," said Bridge.

"You ride it back when you go," suggested Billy.

"But I can't go back," said Bridge; "it was Grayson, the foreman, who made it so hot for me I had to leave. He tried to arrest me and send me to Villa."

"What for?" asked Billy.

"He didn't like me, and wanted to get rid of me." Bridge wouldn't say that his relations with Billy had brought him into trouble.

"Oh, well, I'll take it back myself then, and at the same time I'll tell Penelope what a regular fellow you are, and punch in the foreman's face for good luck."

"No, you mustn't go there. They know you now. It was some of El Orobo's men you shot up day before yesterday when you took their steers from them. They recognized the pony, and one of them had seen you in Cuivaca the night of the robbery. They would be sure to get you, Billy."

Shortly the two came in touch with the retreating Pesitistas who were riding slowly toward their mountain camp. Their pursuers had long since given up the chase, fearing that they might be being lured into the midst of a greatly superior force, and had returned to Cuivaca.

It was nearly morning when Bridge and Billy threw themselves down upon the latter's blankets, fagged.

"Well, well," murmured Billy Byrne; "li'l ol' Bridgie's found his Penelope," and fell asleep.

CHAPTER XIII. BARBARA AGAIN

CAPTAIN BILLY BYRNE rode out of the hills the following afternoon upon a pinto pony that showed the whites of its eyes in a wicked rim about the iris and kept its ears perpetually flattened backward.

At the end of a lariat trailed the Brazos pony, for Billy, laughing aside Bridge's pleas, was on his way to El Orobo Rancho to return the stolen horse to its fair owner.

At the moment of departure Pesita had asked Billy to ride by way of Jose's to instruct the old Indian that he should bear word to one Esteban that Pesita required his presence.

It is a long ride from the retreat of the Pesitistas to Jose's squalid hut, especially if one be leading an extra horse, and so it was that darkness had fallen long before Billy arrived in sight of Jose's. Dismounting some distance from the hut, Billy approached cautiously, since the world is filled with dangers for those who are beyond the law, and one may not be too careful.

Billy could see a light showing through a small window, and toward this he made his way. A short distance from Jose's is another, larger structure from which the former inhabitants had fled the wrath of Pesita. It was dark and apparently tenantless; but as a matter of fact a pair of eyes chanced at the very moment of Billy's coming to be looking out through the open doorway.

The owner turned and spoke to someone behind him.

"Jose has another visitor," he said. "Possibly this one is less harmless than the other. He comes with great caution. Let us investigate."

Three other men rose from their blankets upon the floor and joined the speaker. They were all armed, and clothed in the nondescript uniforms of Villistas. Billy's back was toward them as they sneaked from the hut in which they were intending to spend the night and crept quietly toward him.

Billy was busily engaged in peering through the little window into the interior of the old Indian's hovel. He saw an American in earnest conversation with Jose. Who could the man be? Billy did not recognize him; but presently Jose answered the question.

"It shall be done as you wish, Senor Grayson," he said.

"Ah!" thought Billy; "the foreman of El Orobo. I wonder what business he has with this old scoundrel--and at night."

What other thoughts Billy might have had upon the subject were rudely interrupted by four energetic gentlemen in his rear, who leaped upon him simultaneously and dragged him to the ground. Billy made no outcry; but he fought none the less strenuously for his freedom, and he fought after the manner of Grand Avenue, which is not a pretty, however effective, way it may be.

But four against one when all the advantages lie with the four are heavy odds, and when Grayson and Jose ran out to investigate, and the ranch foreman added his weight to that of the others Billy was finally subdued. That each of his antagonists would carry mementos of the battle for many days was slight compensation for the loss of liberty. However, it was some.

After disarming their captive and tying his hands at his back they jerked him to his feet and examined him.

"Who are you?" asked Grayson. "What you doin' sneakin' 'round spyin' on me, eh?"

"If you wanna know who I am, bo," replied Billy, "go ask de Harlem Hurricane, an' as fer spyin' on youse, I wasn't; but from de looks I guess youse need spyin, yuh tinhorn."

A pony whinnied a short distance from the hut.

"That must be his horse," said one of the Villistas, and walked away to investigate, returning shortly after with the pinto pony and Brazos.

The moment Grayson saw the latter he gave an exclamation of understanding.

"I know him now," he said. "You've made a good catch, Sergeant. This is the fellow who robbed the bank at Cuivaca. I recognize him from the descriptions I've had of him, and the fact that he's got the Brazos pony makes it a cinch. Villa oughter promote you for this."

"Yep," interjected Billy, "he orter make youse an admiral at least; but youse ain't got me home yet, an' it'll take more'n four Dagos an' a tin-horn to do it."

"They'll get you there all right, my friend," Grayson assured him. "Now come along."

They bundled Billy into his own saddle, and shortly after the little party was winding southward along the river in the direction of El Orobo Rancho, with the intention of putting up there for the balance of the night where their prisoner

could be properly secured and guarded. As they rode away from the dilapidated hut of the Indian the old man stood silhouetted against the rectangle of dim light which marked the open doorway, and shook his fist at the back of the departing ranchforeman.

"El cochino!" he cackled, and turned back into his hut.

At El Orobo Rancho Barbara walked to and fro outside the ranchhouse. Within her father sat reading beneath the rays of an oil lamp. From the quarters of the men came the strains of guitar music, and an occasional loud laugh indicated the climax of some of Eddie Shorter's famous Kansas farmer stories.

Barbara was upon the point of returning indoors when her attention was attracted by the approach of a half-dozen horsemen. They reined into the ranchyard and dismounted before the office building. Wondering a little who came so late, Barbara entered the house, mentioning casually to her father that which she had just seen.

The ranch owner, now always fearful of attack, was upon the point of investigating when Grayson rode up to the veranda and dismounted. Barbara and her father were at the door as he ascended the steps.

"Good news!" exclaimed the foreman. "I've got the bank robber, and Brazos, too. Caught the sneakin' coyote up to--up the river a bit." He had almost said "Jose's;" but caught himself in time. "Someone's been cuttin' the wire at the north side of the north pasture, an' I was ridin' up to see ef I could catch 'em at it," he explained.

"He is an American?" asked the boss.

"Looks like it; but he's got the heart of a greaser," replied Grayson. "Some of Villa's men are with me, and they're a-goin' to take him to Cuivaca tomorrow."

Neither Barbara nor her father seemed to enthuse much. To them an American was an American here in Mexico, where every hand was against their race. That at home they might have looked with disgust upon this same man did not alter their attitude here, that no American should take sides against his own people. Barbara said as much to Grayson.

"Why this fellow's one of Pesita's officers," exclaimed Grayson. "He don't deserve no sympathy from us nor from no other Americans. Pesita has sworn to kill every American that falls into his hands, and this fellow's with him to help him do it. He's a bad un."

"I can't help what he may do," insisted Barbara. "He's an American, and I for one would never be a party to his death at the hands of a Mexican, and it will mean death to him to be taken to Cuivaca."

"Well, miss," said Grayson, "you won't hev to be responsible--I'll take all the responsibility there is and welcome. I just thought you'd like to know we had him." He was addressing his employer. The latter nodded, and Grayson turned and left the room. Outside he cast a sneering laugh back over his shoulder and swung into his saddle.

In front of the men's quarters he drew rein again and shouted Eddie's name. Shorter came to the door.

"Get your six-shooter an' a rifle, an' come on over to the office. I want to see you a minute."

Eddie did as he was bid, and when he entered the little room he saw four Mexicans lolling about smoking cigarettes while Grayson stood before a chair in which sat a man with his arms tied behind his back. Grayson turned to Eddie.

"This party here is the slick un that robbed the bank, and got away on thet there Brazos pony thet miserable bookkeepin' dude giv him. The sergeant here an' his men are a-goin' to take him to Cuivaca in the mornin'. You stand guard over him 'til midnight, then they'll relieve you. They gotta get a little sleep first, though, an' I gotta get some supper. Don't stand fer no funny business now, Eddie," Grayson admonished him, and was on the point of leaving the office when a thought occurred to him. "Say, Shorter," he said, "they ain't no way of gettin' out of the little bedroom in back there except through this room. The windows are too small fer a big man to get through. I'll tell you what, we'll lock him up in there an' then you won't hev to worry none an' neither will we. You can jest spread out them Navajos there and go to sleep right plump ag'in the door, an' there won't nobody hev to relieve you all night."

"Sure," said Eddie, "leave it to me--I'll watch the slicker."

Satisfied that their prisoner was safe for the night the Villistas and Grayson departed, after seeing him safely locked in the back room.

At the mention by the foreman of his guard's names--Eddie and Shorter--Billy had studied the face of the young American cowpuncher, for the two names had aroused within his memory a tantalizing suggestion that they should be very familiar. Yet he could connect them in no way with anyone he had known in the past and he was quite sure that he never before had set eyes upon this man.

Sitting in the dark with nothing to occupy him Billy let his mind dwell upon the identity of his jailer, until, as may have happened to you, nothing in the whole world seemed equally as important as the solution of the mystery. Even his impending fate faded into nothingness by comparison with the momentous question as to where he had heard the name Eddie Shorter before.

As he sat puzzling his brain over the inconsequential matter something stirred upon the floor close to his feet, and presently he jerked back a booted foot that a rat had commenced to gnaw upon.

"Helluva place to stick a guy," mused Billy, "in wit a bunch o' man-eatin' rats. Hey!" and he turned his face toward the door. "You, Eddie! Come here!"

Eddie approached the door and listened.

"Wot do you want?" he asked. "None o' your funny business, you know. I'm from Shawnee, Kansas, I am, an' they don't come no slicker from nowhere on earth. You can't fool me."

Shawnee, Kansas! Eddie Shorter! The whole puzzle was cleared in Billy's mind in an instant.

"So you're Eddie Shorter of Shawnee, Kansas, are you?" called Billy. "Well I know your maw, Eddie, an' ef I had such a maw as you got I wouldn't be down here wastin' my time workin' alongside a lot of Dagos; but that ain't what I started out to say, which was that I want a light in here. The damned rats are tryin' to chaw off me kicks an' when they're done wit them they'll climb up after me an' old man Villa'll be sore as a pup."

"You know my maw?" asked Eddie, and there was a wistful note in his voice. "Aw shucks! you don't know her--that's jest some o' your funny, slicker business. You wanna git me in there an' then you'll try an' git aroun' me some sort o' way to let you escape; but I'm too slick for that."

"On the level Eddie, I know your maw," persisted Billy. "I ben in your maw's house jest a few weeks ago. 'Member the horsehair sofa between the windows? 'Member the Bible on the little marble-topped table? Eh? An' Tige? Well, Tige's croaked; but your maw an' your paw ain't an' they want you back, Eddie. I don't care ef you believe me, son, or not; but your maw was mighty good to me, an' you promise me you'll write her an' then go back home as fast as you can. It ain't everybody's got a swell maw like that, an' them as has ought to be good to 'em."

Beyond the closed door Eddie's jaw was commencing to tremble. Memory was flooding his heart and his eyes with sweet recollections of an ample breast where

he used to pillow his head, of a big capable hand that was wont to smooth his brow and stroke back his red hair. Eddie gulped.

"You ain't joshin' me?" he asked. Billy Byrne caught the tremor in the voice.

"I ain't kiddin' you son," he said. "Wotinell do you take me fer--one o' these greasy Dagos? You an' I're Americans--I wouldn't string a home guy down here in this here Godforsaken neck o' the woods."

Billy heard the lock turn, and a moment later the door was cautiously opened revealing Eddie safely ensconced behind two six-shooters.

"That's right, Eddie," said Billy, with a laugh. "Don't you take no chances, no matter how much sob stuff I hand you, fer, I'll give it to you straight, ef I get the chanct I'll make my get-away; but I can't do it wit my flippers trussed, an' you wit a brace of gats sittin' on me. Let's have a light, Eddie. That won't do nobody any harm, an' it may discourage the rats."

Eddie backed across the office to a table where stood a small lamp. Keeping an eye through the door on his prisoner he lighted the lamp and carried it into the back room, setting it upon a commode which stood in one corner.

"You really seen maw?" he asked. "Is she well?"

"Looked well when I seen her," said Billy; "but she wants her boy back a whole lot. I guess she'd look better still ef he walked in on her some day."

"I'll do it," cried Eddie. "The minute they get money for the pay I'll hike. Tell me your name. I'll ask her ef she remembers you when I get home. Gee! but I wish I was walkin' in the front door now."

"She never knew my name," said Billy; "but you tell her you seen the bo that mussed up the two yeggmen who rolled her an' were tryin' to croak her wit a butcher knife. I guess she ain't fergot. Me an' my pal were beatin' it--he was on the square but the dicks was after me an' she let us have money to make our get-away. She's all right, kid."

There came a knock at the outer office door. Eddie sprang back into the front room, closing and locking the door after him, just as Barbara entered.

"Eddie," she asked, "may I see the prisoner? I want to talk to him."

"You want to talk with a bank robber?" exclaimed Eddie. "Why you ain't crazy are you, Miss Barbara?"

"No, I'm not crazy; but I want to speak with him alone for just a moment, Eddie--please."

Eddie hesitated. He knew that Grayson would be angry if he let the boss's daughter into that back room alone with an outlaw and a robber, and the boss himself would probably be inclined to have Eddie drawn and quartered; but it was hard to refuse Miss Barbara anything.

"Where is he?" she asked.

Eddie jerked a thumb in the direction of the door. The key still was in the lock.

"Go to the window and look at the moon, Eddie," suggested the girl. "It's perfectly gorgeous tonight. Please, Eddie," as he still hesitated.

Eddie shook his head and moved slowly toward the window.

"There can't nobody refuse you nothin', miss," he said; "'specially when you got your heart set on it."

"That's a dear, Eddie," purred the girl, and moved swiftly across the room to the locked door.

As she turned the key in the lock she felt a little shiver of nervous excitement run through her. "What sort of man would he be--this hardened outlaw and robber--this renegade American who had cast his lot with the avowed enemies of his own people?" she wondered.

Only her desire to learn of Bridge's fate urged her to attempt so distasteful an interview; but she dared not ask another to put the question for her, since should her complicity in Bridge's escape--provided of course that he had escaped--become known to Villa the fate of the Americans at El Orobo would be definitely sealed.

She turned the knob and pushed the door open, slowly. A man was sitting in a chair in the center of the room. His back was toward her. He was a big man. His broad shoulders loomed immense above the back of the rude chair. A shock of black hair, rumped and tousled, covered a well-shaped head.

At the sound of the door creaking upon its hinges he turned his face in her direction, and as his eyes met hers all four went wide in surprise and incredulity.

"Billy!" she cried.

"Barbara!--you?" and Billy rose to his feet, his bound hands struggling to be free.

The girl closed the door behind her and crossed to him.

"You robbed the bank, Billy?" she asked. "It was you, after the promises you made me to live straight always--for my sake?" Her voice trembled with emotion. The man could see that she suffered, and yet he felt his own anguish, too.

"But you are married," he said. "I saw it in the papers. What do you care, now, Barbara? I'm nothing to you."

"I'm not married, Billy," she cried. "I couldn't marry Mr. Mallory. I tried to make myself believe that I could; but at last I knew that I did not love him and never could, and I wouldn't marry a man I didn't love.

"I never dreamed that it was you here, Billy," she went on. "I came to ask you about Mr. Bridge. I wanted to know if he escaped, or if--if--oh, this awful country! They think no more of human life here than a butcher thinks of the life of the animal heddresses."

A sudden light illumined Billy's mind. Why had it not occurred to him before? This was Bridge's Penelope! The woman he loved was loved by his best friend. And she had sent a messenger to him, to Billy, to save her lover. She had come here to the office tonight to question a stranger--a man she thought an outlaw and a robber--because she could not rest without word from the man she loved. Billy stiffened. He was hurt to the bottom of his heart; but he did not blame Bridge--it was fate. Nor did he blame Barbara because she loved Bridge. Bridge was more her kind anyway. He was a college guy. Billy was only a mucker.

"Bridge got away all right," he said. "And say, he didn't have nothin' to do with pullin' off that safe crackin'. I done it myself. He didn't know I was in town an' I didn't know he was there. He's the squarest guy in the world, Bridge is. He follered me that night an' took a shot at me, thinkin' I was the robber all right but not knowin' I was me. He got my horse, an' when he found it was me, he made me take your pony an' make my get-away, fer he knew Villa's men would croak me sure if they caught me. You can't blame him fer that, can you? Him an' I were good pals--he couldn't do nothin' else. It was him that made me bring your pony back to you. It's in the corral now, I reckon. I was a-bringin' it back when they got me. Now you better go. This ain't no place fer you, an' I ain't had no sleep fer so long I'm most dead." His tones were cool. He appeared bored by her company; though as a matter of fact his heart was breaking with love for her--love that he believed unrequited--and he yearned to tear loose his bonds and crush her in his arms.

It was Barbara's turn now to be hurt. She drew herself up.

"I am sorry that I have disturbed your rest," she said, and walked away, her head in the air; but all the way back to the ranchhouse she kept repeating over and over to herself: "Tomorrow they will shoot him! Tomorrow they will shoot him! Tomorrow they will shoot him!"