

#### **CHAPTER XIV. 'TWTXT LOVE AND DUTY**

FOR an hour Barbara Harding paced the veranda of the ranchhouse, pride and love battling for the ascendancy within her breast. She could not let him die, that she knew; but how might she save him?

The strains of music and the laughter from the bunkhouse had ceased. The ranch slept. Over the brow of the low bluff upon the opposite side of the river a little party of silent horsemen filed downward to the ford. At the bluff's foot a barbed-wire fence marked the eastern boundary of the ranch's enclosed fields. The foremost horseman dismounted and cut the strands of wire, carrying them to one side from the path of the feet of the horses which now passed through the opening he had made.

Down into the river they rode following the ford even in the darkness with an assurance which indicated long familiarity. Then through a fringe of willows out across a meadow toward the ranch buildings the riders made their way. The manner of their approach, their utter silence, the hour, all contributed toward the sinister.

Upon the veranda of the ranchhouse Barbara Harding came to a sudden halt. Her entire manner indicated final decision, and determination. A moment she stood in thought and then ran quickly down the steps and in the direction of the office. Here she found Eddie dozing at his post. She did not disturb him. A glance through the window satisfied her that he was alone with the prisoner. From the office building Barbara passed on to the corral. A few horses stood within the enclosure, their heads drooping dejectedly. As she entered they raised their muzzles and sniffed suspiciously, ears a-cock, and as the girl approached closer to them they moved warily away, snorting, and passed around her to the opposite side of the corral. As they moved by her she scrutinized them and her heart dropped, for Brazos was not among them. He must have been turned out into the pasture.

She passed over to the bars that closed the opening from the corral into the pasture and wormed her way between two of them. A hackamore with a piece of halter rope attached to it hung across the upper bar. Taking it down she moved off across the pasture in the direction the saddle horses most often took when liberated from the corral.

If they had not crossed the river she felt that she might find and catch Brazos, for lumps of sugar and bits of bread had inspired in his equine soul a wondrous attachment for his temporary mistress.

Down the beaten trail the animals had made to the river the girl hurried, her eyes penetrating the darkness ahead and to either hand for the looming bulks that would be the horses she sought, and among which she might hope to discover the gentle little Brazos.

The nearer she came to the river the lower dropped her spirits, for as yet no sign of the animals was to be seen. To have attempted to place a hackamore upon any of the wild creatures in the corral would have been the height of foolishness--only a well-spiced riata in the hands of a strong man could have captured one of these.

Closer and closer to the fringe of willows along the river she came, until, at their very edge, there broke upon her already taut nerves the hideous and uncanny scream of a wildcat. The girl stopped short in her tracks. She felt the chill of fear creep through her skin, and a twitching at the roots of her hair evidenced to her the extremity of her terror. Should she turn back? The horses might be between her and the river, but judgment told her that they had crossed. Should she brave the nervous fright of a passage through that dark, forbidding labyrinth of gloom when she knew that she should not find the horses within reach beyond?

She turned to retrace her steps. She must find another way!

But was there another way? And "Tomorrow they will shoot him!" She shuddered, bit her lower lip in an effort to command her courage, and then, wheeling, plunged into the thicket.

Again the cat screamed--close by--but the girl never hesitated in her advance, and a few moments later she broke through the willows a dozen paces from the river bank. Her eyes strained through the night; but no horses were to be seen.

The trail, cut by the hoofs of many animals, ran deep and straight down into the swirling water. Upon the opposite side Brazos must be feeding or resting, just beyond reach.

Barbara dug her nails into her palms in the bitterness of her disappointment. She followed down to the very edge of the water. It was black and forbidding. Even in the daytime she would not have been confident of following the ford--by night it would be madness to attempt it.

She choked down a sob. Her shoulders drooped. Her head bent forward. She was the picture of disappointment and despair.

"What can I do?" she moaned. "Tomorrow they will shoot him!"

The thought seemed to electrify her.

"They shall not shoot him!" she cried aloud. "They shall not shoot him while I live to prevent it!"

Again her head was up and her shoulders squared. Tying the hackamore about her waist, she took a single deep breath of reassurance and stepped out into the river. For a dozen paces she found no difficulty in following the ford. It was broad and straight; but toward the center of the river, as she felt her way along a step at a time, she came to a place where directly before her the ledge upon which she crossed shelved off into deep water. She turned upward, trying to locate the direction of the new turn; but here too there was no footing. Down river she felt solid rock beneath her feet. Ah! this was the way, and boldly she stepped out, the water already above her knees. Two, three steps she took, and with each one her confidence and hope arose, and then the fourth step--and there was no footing. She felt herself lunging into the stream, and tried to draw back and regain the ledge; but the force of the current was too much for her, and, so suddenly it seemed that she had thrown herself in, she was in the channel swimming for her life.

The trend of the current there was back in the direction of the bank she had but just quitted, yet so strong was her determination to succeed for Billy Byrne's sake that she turned her face toward the opposite shore and fought to reach the seemingly impossible goal which love had set for her. Again and again she was swept under by the force of the current. Again and again she rose and battled, not for her own life; but for the life of the man she once had loathed and whom she later had come to love. Inch by inch she won toward the shore of her desire, and inch by inch of her progress she felt her strength failing. Could she win? Ah! if she were but a man, and with the thought came another: Thank God that I am a woman with a woman's love which gives strength to drive me into the clutches of death for his sake!

Her heart thundered in tumultuous protest against the strain of her panting lungs. Her limbs felt cold and numb; but she could not give up even though she was now convinced that she had thrown her life away uselessly. They would find her body; but no one would ever guess what had driven her to her death. Not even he would know that it was for his sake. And then she felt the tugging of the channel current suddenly lessen, an eddy carried her gently inshore, her feet touched the sand and gravel of the bottom.

Gasping for breath, staggering, stumbling, she reeled on a few paces and then slipped down clutching at the river's bank. Here the water was shallow, and here she lay until her strength returned. Then she urged herself up and onward, climbed to the top of the bank with success at last within reach.

To find the horses now required but a few minutes' search. They stood huddled in a black mass close to the barbed-wire fence at the extremity of the pasture. As she approached them they commenced to separate slowly, edging away while they faced her in curiosity. Softly she called: "Brazos! Come, Brazos!" until a unit of the moving mass detached itself and came toward her, nickering.

"Good Brazos!" she cooed. "That's a good pony," and walked forward to meet him.

The animal let her reach up and stroke his forehead, while he muzzled about her for the expected tidbit. Gently she worked the hackamore over his nose and above his ears, and when it was safely in place she breathed a deep sigh of relief and throwing her arms about his neck pressed her cheek to his.

"You dear old Brazos," she whispered.

The horse stood quietly while the girl wriggled herself to his back, and then at a word and a touch from her heels moved off at a walk in the direction of the ford. The crossing this time was one of infinite ease, for Barbara let the rope lie loose and Brazos take his own way.

Through the willows upon the opposite bank he shouldered his path, across the meadow still at a walk, lest they arouse attention, and through a gate which led directly from the meadow into the ranchyard. Here she tied him to the outside of the corral, while she went in search of saddle and bridle. Whose she took she did not know, nor care, but that the saddle was enormously heavy she was perfectly aware long before she had dragged it halfway to where Brazos stood.

Three times she essayed to lift it to his back before she succeeded in accomplishing the Herculean task, and had it been any other horse upon the ranch than Brazos the thing could never have been done; but the kindly little pony stood in statuesque resignation while the heavy Mexican tree was banged and thumped against his legs and ribs, until a lucky swing carried it to his withers.

Saddled and bridled Barbara led him to the rear of the building and thus, by a roundabout way, to the back of the office building. Here she could see a light in the room in which Billy was confined, and after dropping the bridle reins to the ground she made her way to the front of the structure.

Creeping stealthily to the porch she peered in at the window. Eddie was stretched out in cramped though seeming luxury in an office chair. His feet were cocked up on the desk before him. In his lap lay his six-shooter ready for any emergency. Another reposed in its holster at his belt.

Barbara tiptoed to the door. Holding her breath she turned the knob gently. The door swung open without a sound, and an instant later she stood within the room. Again her eyes were fixed upon Eddie Shorter. She saw his nerveless fingers relax their hold upon the grip of his revolver. She saw the weapon slip farther down into his lap. He did not move, other than to the deep and regular breathing of profound slumber.

Barbara crossed the room to his side.

Behind the ranchhouse three figures crept forward in the shadows. Behind them a matter of a hundred yards stood a little clump of horses and with them were the figures of more men. These waited in silence. The other three crept toward the house. It was such a ranchhouse as you might find by the scores or hundreds throughout Texas. Grayson, evidently, or some other Texan, had designed it. There was nothing Mexican about it, nor anything beautiful. It stood two storied, verandaed and hideous, a blot upon the soil of picturesque Mexico.

To the roof of the veranda clambered the three prowlers, and across it to an open window. The window belonged to the bedroom of Miss Barbara Harding. Here they paused and listened, then two of them entered the room. They were gone for but a few minutes. When they emerged they showed evidences, by their gestures to the third man who had awaited outside, of disgust and disappointment.

Cautiously they descended as they had come and made their way back to those other men who had remained with the horses. Here there ensued a low-toned conference, and while it progressed Barbara Harding reached forth a steady hand which belied the terror in her soul and plucked the revolver from Eddie Shorter's lap. Eddie slept on.

Again on tiptoe the girl recrossed the office to the locked door leading into the back room. The key was in the lock. Gingerly she turned it, keeping a furtive eye upon the sleeping guard, and the muzzle of his own revolver leveled menacingly upon him. Eddie Shorter stirred in his sleep and raised a hand to his face. The heart of Barbara Harding ceased to beat while she stood waiting for the man to open his eyes and discover her; but he did nothing of the kind. Instead his hand dropped limply at his side and he resumed his regular breathing.

The key turned in the lock beneath the gentle pressure of her fingers, the bolt slipped quietly back and she pushed the door ajar. Within, Billy Byrne turned inquiring eyes in the direction of the opening door, and as he saw who it was who entered surprise showed upon his face; but he spoke no word for the girl held a silencing finger to her lips.

Quickly she came to his side and motioned him to rise while she tugged at the knots which held the bonds in place about his arms. Once she stopped long enough to recross the room and close the door which she had left open when she entered.

It required fully five minutes--the longest five minutes of Barbara Harding's life, she thought--before the knots gave to her efforts; but at last the rope fell to the floor and Billy Byrne was free.

He started to speak, to thank her, and, perhaps, to scold her for the rash thing she had undertaken for him; but she silenced him again, and with a whispered, "Come!" turned toward the door.

As she opened it a crack to reconnoiter she kept the revolver pointed straight ahead of her into the adjoining room. Eddie, however, still slept on in peaceful ignorance of the trick which was being played upon him.

Now the two started forward for the door which opened from the office upon the porch, and as they did so Barbara turned again toward Billy to caution him to silence for his spurs had tinkled as he moved. For a moment their eyes were not upon Eddie Shorter and Fate had it that at that very moment Eddie awoke and opened his own eyes.

The sight that met them was so astonishing that for a second the Kansan could not move. He saw Barbara Harding, a revolver in her hand, aiding the outlaw to escape, and in the instant that surprise kept him motionless Eddie saw, too, another picture--the picture of a motherly woman in a little farmhouse back in Kansas, and Eddie realized that this man, this outlaw, had been the means of arousing within him a desire and a determination to return again to those loving arms. Too, the man had saved his mother from injury, and possible death.

Eddie shut his eyes quickly and thought hard and fast. Miss Barbara had always been kind to him. In his boyish heart he had loved her, hopelessly of course, in a boyish way. She wanted the outlaw to escape. Eddie realized that he would do anything that Miss Barbara wanted, even if he had to risk his life at it.

The girl and the man were at the door. She pushed him through ahead of her while she kept the revolver leveled upon Eddie, then she passed out after him and closed the door, while Eddie Shorter kept his eyes tightly closed and prayed to his God that Billy Byrne might get safely away.

Outside and in the rear of the office building Barbara pressed the revolver upon Billy.

"You will need it," she said. "There is Brazos--take him. God bless and guard you, Billy!" and she was gone.

Billy swallowed hard. He wanted to run after her and take her in his arms; but he recalled Bridge, and with a sigh turned toward the patient Brazos. Languidly he gathered up the reins and mounted, and then unconcernedly as though he were an honored guest departing by daylight he rode out of the ranchyard and turned Brazos' head north up the river road.

And as Billy disappeared in the darkness toward the north Barbara Harding walked slowly toward the ranchhouse, while from a little group of men and horses a hundred yards away three men detached themselves and crept toward her, for they had seen her in the moonlight as she left Billy outside the office and strolled slowly in the direction of the house.

They hid in the shadow at the side of the house until the girl had turned the corner and was approaching the veranda, then they ran quickly forward and as she mounted the steps she was seized from behind and dragged backward. A hand was clapped over her mouth and a whispered threat warned her to silence.

Half dragging and half carrying her the three men bore her back to where their confederates awaited them. A huge fellow mounted his pony and Barbara was lifted to the horn of the saddle before him. Then the others mounted and as silently as they had come they rode away, following the same path.

Barbara Harding had not cried out nor attempted to, for she had seen very shortly after her capture that she was in the hands of Indians and she judged from what she had heard of the little band of Pimans who held forth in the mountains to the east that they would as gladly knife her as not.

Jose was a Piman, and she immediately connected Jose with the perpetration, or at least the planning of her abduction. Thus she felt assured that no harm would come to her, since Jose had been famous in his time for the number and size of the ransoms he had collected.

Her father would pay what was demanded, she would be returned and, aside from a few days of discomfort and hardship, she would be none the worse off for her experience. Reasoning thus it was not difficult to maintain her composure and presence of mind.

As Barbara was borne toward the east, Billy Byrne rode steadily northward. It was his intention to stop at Jose's hut and deliver the message which Pesita had given him for the old Indian. Then he would disappear into the mountains to the

west, join Pesita and urge a new raid upon some favored friend of General Francisco Villa, for Billy had no love for Villa.

He should have been glad to pay his respects to El Orobo Rancho and its foreman; but the fact that Anthony Harding owned it and that he and Barbara were there was sufficient effectually to banish all thoughts of revenge along that line.

"Maybe I can get his goat later," he thought, "when he's away from the ranch. I don't like that stiff, anyhow. He orter been a harness bull."

It was four o'clock in the morning when Billy dismounted in front of Jose's hut. He pounded on the door until the man came and opened it.

"Eh!" exclaimed Jose as he saw who his early morning visitor was, "you got away from them. Fine!" and the old man chuckled. "I send word to Pesita two, four hours ago that Villistas capture Capitan Byrne and take him to Cuivaca."

"Thanks," said Billy. "Pesita wants you to send Esteban to him. I didn't have no chance to tell you last night while them pikers was stickin' aroun', so I stops now on my way back to the hills."

"I will send Esteban tonight if I can get him; but I do not know. Esteban is working for the pig, Grayson."

"Wot's he doin' fer Grayson?" asked Billy. "And what was the Grayson guy doin' up here with you, Jose? Ain't you gettin' pretty thick with Pesita's enemies?"

"Jose good friends everybody," and the old man grinned. "Grayson have a job he want good men for. Jose furnish men. Grayson pay well. Job got nothin' do Pesita, Villa, Carranza, revolution--just private job. Grayson want senorita. He pay to get her. That all."

"Oh," said Billy, and yawned. He was not interested in Mr. Grayson's amours. "Why didn't the poor boob go get her himself?" he inquired disinterestedly. "He must be a yap to hire a bunch o' guys to go cop off a siwash girl fer him."

"It is not a siwash girl, Senor Capitan," said Jose. "It is one beautiful senorita--the daughter of the owner of El Orobo Rancho."

"What?" cried Billy Byrne. "What's that you say?"

"Yes, Senor Capitan, what of it?" inquired Jose. "Grayson he pay me furnish the men. Esteban he go with his warriors. I get Esteban. They go tonight take away the senorita; but not for Grayson," and the old fellow laughed. "I can no help can

I? Grayson pay me money get men. I get them. I no help if they keep girl," and he shrugged.

"They're comin' for her tonight?" cried Billy.

"Si, senior," replied Jose. "Doubtless they already take her."

"Hell!" muttered Billy Byrne, as he swung Brazos about so quickly that the little pony pivoted upon his hind legs and dashed away toward the south over the same trail he had just traversed.