

CHAPTER XV. AN INDIAN'S TREACHERY

THE Brazos pony had traveled far that day but for only a trifle over ten miles had he carried a rider upon his back. He was, consequently, far from fagged as he leaped forward to the lifted reins and tore along the dusty river trail back in the direction of Orobo.

Never before had Brazos covered ten miles in so short a time, for it was not yet five o'clock when, reeling with fatigue, he stopped, staggered and fell in front of the office building at El Orobo.

Eddie Shorter had sat in the chair as Barbara and Billy had last seen him waiting until Byrne should have an ample start before arousing Grayson and reporting the prisoner's escape. Eddie had determined that he would give Billy an hour. He grinned as he anticipated the rage of Grayson and the Villistas when they learned that their bird had flown, and as he mused and waited he fell asleep.

It was broad daylight when Eddie awoke, and as he looked up at the little clock ticking against the wall, and saw the time he gave an exclamation of surprise and leaped to his feet. Just as he opened the outer door of the office he saw a horseman leap from a winded pony in front of the building. He saw the animal collapse and sink to the ground, and then he recognized the pony as Brazos, and another glance at the man brought recognition of him, too.

"You?" cried Eddie. "What are you doin' back here? I gotta take you now," and he started to draw his revolver; but Billy Byrne had him covered before ever his hand reached the grip of his gun.

"Put 'em up!" admonished Billy, "and listen to me. This ain't no time fer gunplay or no such foolishness. I ain't back here to be took--get that out o' your nut. I'm tipped off that a bunch o' siwashes was down here last night to swipe Miss Harding. Come! We gotta go see if she's here or not, an' don't try any funny business on me, Eddie. I ain't a-goin' to be taken again, an' whoever tries it gets his, see?"

Eddie was down off the porch in an instant, and making for the ranchhouse.

"I'm with you," he said. "Who told you? And who done it?"

"Never mind who told me; but a siwash named Esteban was to pull the thing off for Grayson. Grayson wanted Miss Harding an' he was goin' to have her stolen for him."

"The hound!" muttered Eddie.

The two men dashed up onto the veranda of the ranchhouse and pounded at the door until a Chinaman opened it and stuck out his head, inquiringly.

"Is Miss Harding here?" demanded Billy.

"Missy Hardie Kleep," snapped the servant. "Wally wanee here flo blekfas?", and would have shut the door in their faces had not Billy intruded a heavy boot. The next instant he placed a large palm over the celestial's face and pushed the man back into the house. Once inside he called Mr. Harding's name aloud.

"What is it?" asked the gentleman a moment later as he appeared in a bedroom doorway off the living-room clad in his pajamas. "What's the matter? Why, gad man, is that you? Is this really Billy Byrne?"

"Sure," replied Byrne shortly; "but we can't waste any time chinnin'. I heard that Miss Barbara was goin' to be swiped last night--I heard that she had been. Now hurry and see if she is here."

Anthony Harding turned and leaped up the narrow stairway to the second floor four steps at a time. He hadn't gone upstairs in that fashion in forty years. Without even pausing to rap he burst into his daughter's bedroom. It was empty. The bed was unruffled. It had not been slept in. With a moan the man turned back and ran hastily to the other rooms upon the second floor--Barbara was nowhere to be found. Then he hastened downstairs to the two men awaiting him.

As he entered the room from one end Grayson entered it from the other through the doorway leading out upon the veranda. Billy Byrne had heard footsteps upon the boards without and he was ready, so that as Grayson entered he found himself looking straight at the business end of a sixshooter. The foreman halted, and stood looking in surprise first at Billy Byrne, and then at Eddie Shorter and Mr. Harding.

"What does this mean?" he demanded, addressing Eddie. "What you doin' here with your prisoner? Who told you to let him out, eh?"

"Can the chatter," growled Billy Byrne. "Shorter didn't let me out. I escaped hours ago, and I've just come back from Jose's to ask you where Miss Harding is, you low-lived cur, you. Where is she?"

"What has Mr. Grayson to do with it?" asked Mr. Harding. "How should he know anything about it? It's all a mystery to me--you here, of all men in the world, and Grayson talking about you as the prisoner. I can't make it out. Quick, though, Byrne, tell me all you know about Barbara."

Billy kept Grayson covered as he replied to the request of Harding.

"This guy hires a bunch of Pimans to steal Miss Barbara," he said. "I got it straight from the fellow he paid the money to for gettin' him the right men to pull off the job. He wants her it seems," and Billy shot a look at the ranch foreman that would have killed if looks could. "She can't have been gone long. I seen her after midnight, just before I made my getaway, so they can't have taken her very far. This thing here can't help us none neither, for he don't know where she is any more'n we do. He thinks he does; but he don't. The siwashes framed it on him, an' they've doubled-crossed him. I got that straight too; but, Gawd! I don't know where they've taken her or what they're goin' to do with her."

As he spoke he turned his eyes for the first time away from Grayson and looked full in Anthony Harding's face. The latter saw beneath the strong character lines of the other's countenance the agony of fear and doubt that lay heavy upon his heart.

In the brief instant that Billy's watchful gaze left the figure of the ranch foreman the latter saw the opportunity he craved. He was standing directly in the doorway--a single step would carry him out of range of Byrne's gun, placing a wall between it and him, and Grayson was not slow in taking that step.

When Billy turned his eyes back the Texan had disappeared, and by the time the former reached the doorway Grayson was halfway to the office building on the veranda of which stood the four soldiers of Villa grumbling and muttering over the absence of their prisoner of the previous evening.

Billy Byrne stepped out into the open. The ranch foreman called aloud to the four Mexicans that their prisoner was at the ranchhouse and as they looked in that direction they saw him, revolver in hand, coming slowly toward them. There was a smile upon his lips which they could not see because of the distance, and which, not knowing Billy Byrne, they would not have interpreted correctly; but the revolver they did understand, and at sight of it one of them threw his carbine to his shoulder. His finger, however, never closed upon the trigger, for there came the sound of a shot from beyond Billy Byrne and the Mexican staggered forward, pitching over the edge of the porch to the ground.

Billy turned his head in the direction from which the shot had come and saw Eddie Shorter running toward him, a smoking six-shooter in his right hand.

"Go back," commanded Byrne; "this is my funeral."

"Not on your life," replied Eddie Shorter. "Those greasers don't take no white man off'n El Orobo, while I'm here. Get busy! They're comin'."

And sure enough they were coming, and as they came their carbines popped and the bullets whizzed about the heads of the two Americans. Grayson, too, had taken a hand upon the side of the Villistas. From the bunkhouse other men were running rapidly in the direction of the fight, attracted by the first shots.

Billy and Eddie stood their ground, a few paces apart. Two more of Villa's men went down. Grayson ran for cover. Then Billy Byrne dropped the last of the Mexicans just as the men from the bunkhouse came panting upon the scene. There were both Americans and Mexicans among them. All were armed and weapons were ready in their hands.

They paused a short distance from the two men. Eddie's presence upon the side of the stranger saved Billy from instant death, for Eddie was well liked by both his Mexican and American fellow-workers.

"What's the fuss?" asked an American.

Eddie told them, and when they learned that the boss's daughter had been spirited away and that the ranch foreman was at the bottom of it the anger of the Americans rose to a dangerous pitch.

"Where is he?" someone asked. They were gathered in a little cluster now about Billy Byrne and Shorter.

"I saw him duck behind the office building," said Eddie.

"Come on," said another. "We'll get him."

"Someone get a rope." The men spoke in low, ordinary tones--they appeared unexcited. Determination was the most apparent characteristic of the group. One of them ran back toward the bunkhouse for his rope. The others walked slowly in the direction of the rear of the office building. Grayson was not there. The search proceeded. The Americans were in advance. The Mexicans kept in a group by themselves a little in rear of the others--it was not their trouble. If the gringos wanted to lynch another gringo, well and good--that was the gringos' business. They would keep out of it, and they did.

Down past the bunkhouse and the cookhouse to the stables the searchers made their way. Grayson could not be found. In the stables one of the men made a discovery--the foreman's saddle had vanished. Out in the corrals they went. One of the men laughed--the bars were down and the saddle horses gone. Eddie Shorter presently pointed out across the pasture and the river to the skyline of the low bluffs beyond. The others looked. A horseman was just visible urging his

mount upward to the crest, the two stood in silhouette against the morning sky pink with the new sun.

"That's him," said Eddie.

"Let him go," said Billy Byrne. "He won't never come back and he ain't worth chasin'. Not while we got Miss Barbara to look after. My horse is down there with yours. I'm goin' down to get him. Will you come, Shorter? I may need help--I ain't much with a rope yet."

He started off without waiting for a reply, and all the Americans followed. Together they circled the horses and drove them back to the corral. When Billy had saddled and mounted he saw that the others had done likewise.

"We're goin' with you," said one of the men. "Miss Barbara b'longs to us."

Billy nodded and moved off in the direction of the ranchhouse. Here he dismounted and with Eddie Shorter and Mr. Harding commenced circling the house in search of some manner of clue to the direction taken by the abductors. It was not long before they came upon the spot where the Indians' horses had stood the night before. From there the trail led plainly down toward the river. In a moment ten Americans were following it, after Mr. Harding had supplied Billy Byrne with a carbine, another six-shooter, and ammunition.

Through the river and the cut in the barbed-wire fence, then up the face of the bluff and out across the low mesa beyond the trail led. For a mile it was distinct, and then disappeared as though the riders had separated.

"Well," said Billy, as the others drew around him for consultation, "they'd be goin' to the hills there. They was Pimans--Esteban's tribe. They got her up there in the hills somewheres. Let's split up an' search the hills for her. Whoever comes on 'em first'll have to do some shootin' and the rest of us can close in an' help. We can go in pairs--then if one's killed the other can ride out an' lead the way back to where it happened."

The men seemed satisfied with the plan and broke up into parties of two. Eddie Shorter paired off with Billy Byrne.

"Spread out," said the latter to his companions. "Eddie an' I'll ride straight ahead--the rest of you can fan out a few miles on either side of us. S'long an' good luck," and he started off toward the hills, Eddie Shorter at his side.

Back at the ranch the Mexican vaqueros lounged about, grumbling. With no foreman there was nothing to do except talk about their troubles. They had not been paid since the looting of the bank at Cuivaca, for Mr. Harding had been

unable to get any silver from elsewhere until a few days since. He now had assurances that it was on the way to him; but whether or not it would reach El Orobo was a question.

"Why should we stay here when we are not paid?" asked one of them.

"Yes, why?" chorused several others.

"There is nothing to do here," said another. "We will go to Cuivaca. I, for one, am tired of working for the gringos."

This met with the unqualified approval of all, and a few moments later the men had saddled their ponies and were galloping away in the direction of sun-baked Cuivaca. They sang now, and were happy, for they were as little boys playing hooky from school--not bad men; but rather irresponsible children.

Once in Cuivaca they swooped down upon the drinking-place, where, with what little money a few of them had left they proceeded to get drunk.

Later in the day an old, dried-up Indian entered. He was hot and dusty from a long ride.

"Hey, Jose!" cried one of the vaqueros from El Orobo Rancho; "you old rascal, what are you doing here?"

Jose looked around upon them. He knew them all--they represented the Mexican contingent of the riders of El Orobo. Jose wondered what they were all doing here in Cuivaca at one time. Even upon a pay day it never had been the rule of El Orobo to allow more than four men at a time to come to town.

"Oh, Jose come to buy coffee and tobacco," he replied. He looked about searchingly. "Where are the others?" he asked, "--the gringos?"

"They have ridden after Esteban," explained one of the vaqueros. "He has run off with Senorita Harding."

Jose raised his eyebrows as though this was all news.

"And Senor Grayson has gone with them?" he asked. "He was very fond of the senorita."

"Senor Grayson has run away," went on the other speaker. "The other gringos wished to hang him, for it is said he has bribed Esteban to do this thing."

Again Jose raised his eyebrows. "Impossible!" he ejaculated. "And who then guards the ranch?" he asked presently.

"Senor Harding, two Mexican house servants, and a Chinaman," and the vaquero laughed.

"I must be going," Jose announced after a moment. "It is a long ride for an old man from my poor home to Cuivaca, and back again."

The vaqueros were paying no further attention to him, and the Indian passed out and sought his pony; but when he had mounted and ridden from town he took a strange direction for one whose path lies to the east, since he turned his pony's head toward the northwest.

Jose had ridden far that day, since Billy had left his humble hut. He had gone to the west to the little rancho of one of Pesita's adherents who had dispatched a boy to carry word to the bandit that his Captain Byrne had escaped the Villistas, and then Jose had ridden into Cuivaca by a circuitous route which brought him up from the east side of the town.

Now he was riding once again for Pesita; but this time he would bear the information himself. He found the chief in camp and after begging tobacco and a cigarette paper the Indian finally reached the purpose of his visit.

"Jose has just come from Cuivaca," he said, "and there he drank with all the Mexican vaqueros of El Orobo Rancho--ALL, my general, you understand. It seems that Esteban has carried off the beautiful senorita of El Orobo Rancho, and the vaqueros tell Jose that ALL the American vaqueros have ridden in search of her--ALL, my general, you understand. In such times of danger it is odd that the gringos should leave El Orobo thus unguarded. Only the rich Senor Harding, two house servants, and a Chinaman remain."

A man lay stretched upon his blankets in a tent next to that occupied by Pesita. At the sound of the speaker's voice, low though it was, he raised his head and listened. He heard every word, and a scowl settled upon his brow. Barbara stolen! Mr Harding practically alone upon the ranch! And Pesita in possession of this information!

Bridge rose to his feet. He buckled his cartridge belt about his waist and picked up his carbine, then he crawled under the rear wall of his tent and walked slowly off in the direction of the picket line where the horses were tethered.

"Ah, Senor Bridge," said a pleasant voice in his ear; "where to?"

Bridge turned quickly to look into the smiling, evil face of Rozales.

"Oh," he replied, "I'm going out to see if I can't find some shooting. It's awfully dull sitting around here doing nothing."

"Si, senior," agreed Rozales; "I, too, find it so. Let us go together--I know where the shooting is best."

"I don't doubt it," thought Bridge; "probably in the back;" but aloud he said: "Certainly, that will be fine," for he guessed that Rozales had been set to watch his movements and prevent his escape, and, perchance, to be the sole witness of some unhappy event which should carry Senor Bridge to the arms of his fathers.

Rozales called a soldier to saddle and bridle their horses and shortly after the two were riding abreast down the trail out of the hills. Where it was necessary that they ride in single file Bridge was careful to see that Rozales rode ahead, and the Mexican graciously permitted the American to fall behind.

If he was inspired by any other motive than simple espionage he was evidently content to bide his time until chance gave him the opening he desired, and it was equally evident that he felt as safe in front of the American as behind him.

At a point where a ravine down which they had ridden debauched upon a mesa Rozales suggested that they ride to the north, which was not at all the direction in which Bridge intended going. The American demurred.

"But there is no shooting down in the valley," urged Rozales.

"I think there will be," was Bridge's enigmatical reply, and then, with a sudden exclamation of surprise he pointed over Rozales' shoulder. "What's that?" he cried in a voice tense with excitement.

The Mexican turned his head quickly in the direction Bridge's index finger indicated.

"I see nothing," said Rozales, after a moment.

"You do now, though," replied Bridge, and as the Mexican's eyes returned in the direction of his companion he was forced to admit that he did see something--the dismal, hollow eye of a six-shooter looking him straight in the face.

"Senor Bridge!" exclaimed Rozales. "What are you doing? What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Bridge, "that if you are at all solicitous of your health you'll climb down off that pony, not forgetting to keep your hands above your head when you reach the ground. Now climb!"

Rozales dismounted.

"Turn your back toward me," commanded the American, and when the other had obeyed him, Bridge dismounted and removed the man's weapons from his belt.

"Now you may go, Rozales," he said, "and should you ever have an American in your power again remember that I spared your life when I might easily have taken it--when it would have been infinitely safer for me to have done it."

The Mexican made no reply, but the black scowl that clouded his face boded ill for the next gringo who should be so unfortunate as to fall into his hands. Slowly he wheeled about and started back up the trail in the direction of the Pesita camp.

"I'll be halfway to El Orobo," thought Bridge, "before he gets a chance to tell Pesita what happened to him," and then he remounted and rode on down into the valley, leading Rozales' horse behind him.

It would never do, he knew, to turn the animal loose too soon, since he would doubtless make his way back to camp, and in doing so would have to pass Rozales who would catch him. Time was what Bridge wanted--to be well on his way to Orobo before Pesita should learn of his escape.

Bridge knew nothing of what had happened to Billy, for Pesita had seen to it that the information was kept from the American. The latter had, nevertheless, been worrying not a little at the absence of his friend for he knew that he had taken his liberty and his life in his hands in riding down to El Orobo among avowed enemies.

Far to his rear Rozales plodded sullenly up the steep trail through the mountains, revolving in his mind various exquisite tortures he should be delighted to inflict upon the next gringo who came into his power.