

## CHAPTER XVI. EDDIE MAKES GOOD

BILLY BYRNE and Eddie Shorter rode steadily in the direction of the hills. Upon either side and at intervals of a mile or more stretched the others of their party, occasionally visible; but for the most part not. Once in the hills the two could no longer see their friends or be seen by them.

Both Byrne and Eddie felt that chance had placed them upon the right trail for a well-marked and long-used path wound upward through a canyon along which they rode. It was an excellent location for an ambush, and both men breathed more freely when they had passed out of it into more open country upon a narrow tableland between the first foothills and the main range of mountains.

Here again was the trail well marked, and when Eddie, looking ahead, saw that it appeared to lead in the direction of a vivid green spot close to the base of the gray brown hills he gave an exclamation of assurance.

"We're on the right trail all right, old man," he said. "They's water there," and he pointed ahead at the green splotch upon the gray. "That's where they'd be havin' their village. I ain't never been up here so I ain't familiar with the country. You see we don't run no cattle this side the river--the Pimans won't let us. They don't care to have no white men pokin' round in their country; but I'll bet a hat we find a camp there."

Onward they rode toward the little spot of green. Sometimes it was in sight and again as they approached higher ground, or wound through gullies and ravines it was lost to their sight; but always they kept it as their goal. The trail they were upon led to it--of that there could be no longer the slightest doubt. And as they rode with their destination in view black, beady eyes looked down upon them from the very green oasis toward which they urged their ponies--tiring now from the climb.

A lithe, brown body lay stretched comfortably upon a bed of grasses at the edge of a little rise of ground beneath which the riders must pass before they came to the cluster of huts which squatted in a tiny natural park at the foot of the main peak. Far above the watcher a spring of clear, pure water bubbled out of the mountain-side, and running downward formed little pools among the rocks which held it. And with this water the Pimans irrigated their small fields before it sank from sight again into the earth just below their village. Beside the brown body lay a long rifle. The man's eyes watched, unblinking, the two specks far below him whom he knew and had known for an hour were gringos.

Another brown body wormed itself forward to his side and peered over the edge of the declivity down upon the white men. He spoke a few words in a whisper to him who watched with the rifle, and then crawled back again and disappeared. And all the while, onward and upward came Billy Byrne and Eddie Shorter, each knowing in his heart that if not already, then at any moment a watcher would discover them and a little later a bullet would fly that would find one of them, and they took the chance for the sake of the American girl who lay hidden somewhere in these hills, for in no other way could they locate her hiding place more quickly. Any one of the other eight Americans who rode in pairs into the hills at other points to the left and right of Billy Byrne and his companion would have and was even then cheerfully taking the same chances that Eddie and Billy took, only the latter were now assured that to one of them would fall the sacrifice, for as they had come closer Eddie had seen a thin wreath of smoke rising from among the trees of the oasis. Now, indeed, were they sure that they had chanced upon the trail to the Piman village.

"We gotta keep our eyes peeled," said Eddie, as they wound into a ravine which from its location evidently led directly up to the village. "We ain't far from 'em now, an' if they get us they'll get us about here."

As though to punctuate his speech with the final period a rifle cracked above them. Eddie jumped spasmodically and clutched his breast.

"I'm hit," he said, quite unemotionally.

Billy Byrne's revolver had answered the shot from above them, the bullet striking where Billy had seen a puff of smoke following the rifle shot. Then Billy turned toward Eddie.

"Hit bad?" he asked.

"Yep, I guess so," said Eddie. "What'll we do? Hide up here, or ride back after the others?"

Another shot rang out above them, although Billy had been watching for a target at which to shoot again--a target which he had been positive he would get when the man rose to fire again. And Billy did see the fellow at last--a few paces from where he had first fired; but not until the other had dropped Eddie's horse beneath him. Byrne fired again, and this time he had the satisfaction of seeing a brown body rise, struggle a moment, and then roll over once upon the grass before it came to rest.

"I reckon we'll stay here," said Billy, looking ruefully at Eddie's horse.

Eddie rose and as he did so he staggered and grew very white. Billy dismounted and ran forward, putting an arm about him. Another shot came from above and Billy Byrne's pony grunted and collapsed.

"Hell!" exclaimed Byrne. "We gotta get out of this," and lifting his wounded comrade in his arms he ran for the shelter of the bluff from the summit of which the snipers had fired upon them. Close in, hugging the face of the perpendicular wall of tumbled rock and earth, they were out of range of the Indians; but Billy did not stop when he had reached temporary safety. Farther up toward the direction in which lay the village, and halfway up the side of the bluff Billy saw what he took to be excellent shelter. Here the face of the bluff was less steep and upon it lay a number of large boulders, while others protruded from the ground about them.

Toward these Billy made his way. The wounded man across his shoulder was suffering indescribable agonies; but he bit his lip and stifled the cries that each step his comrade took seemed to wrench from him, lest he attract the enemy to their position.

Above them all was silence, yet Billy knew that alert, red foemen were creeping to the edge of the bluff in search of their prey. If he could but reach the shelter of the boulders before the Pimans discovered them!

The minutes that were consumed in covering the hundred yards seemed as many hours to Billy Byrne; but at last he dragged the fainting cowboy between two large boulders close under the edge of the bluff and found himself in a little, natural fortress, well adapted to defense.

From above they were protected from the fire of the Indians upon the bluff by the height of the boulder at the foot of which they lay, while another just in front hid them from possible marksmen across the canyon. Smaller rocks scattered about gave promise of shelter from flank fire, and as soon as he had deposited Eddie in the comparative safety of their retreat Byrne commenced forming a low breastwork upon the side facing the village--the direction from which they might naturally expect attack. This done he turned his attention to the opening upon the opposite side and soon had a similar defense constructed there, then he turned his attention to Eddie, though keeping a watchful eye upon both approaches to their stronghold.

The Kansan lay upon his side, moaning. Blood stained his lips and nostrils, and when Billy Byrne opened his shirt and found a gaping wound in his right breast he knew how serious was his companion's injury. As he felt Billy working over him the boy opened his eyes.

"Do you think I'm done for?" he asked in a tortured whisper.

"Nothin' doin'," lied Billy cheerfully. "Just a scratch. You'll be all right in a day or two."

Eddie shook his head wearily. "I wish I could believe you," he said. "I ben figgerin' on goin' back to see maw. I ain't thought o' nothin' else since you told me 'bout how she missed me. I ken see her right now just like I was there. I'll bet she's scrubbin' the kitchen floor. Maw was always a-scrubbin' somethin'. Gee! but it's tough to cash in like this just when I was figgerin' on goin' home."

Billy couldn't think of anything to say. He turned to look up and down the canyon in search of the enemy.

"Home!" whispered Eddie. "Home!"

"Aw, shucks!" said Billy kindly. "You'll get home all right, kid. The boys must a-heard the shootin' an' they'll be along in no time now. Then we'll clean up this bunch o' coons an' have you back to El Orobo an' nursed into shape in no time."

Eddie tried to smile as he looked up into the other's face. He reached a hand out and laid it on Billy's arm.

"You're all right, old man," he whispered. "I know you're lyin' an' so do you; but it makes me feel better anyway to have you say them things."

Billy felt as one who has been caught stealing from a blind man. The only adequate reply of which he could think was, "Aw, shucks!"

"Say," said Eddie after a moment's silence, "if you get out o' here an' ever go back to the States promise me you'll look up maw and paw an' tell 'em I was comin' home--to stay. Tell 'em I died decent, too, will you--died like paw was always a-tellin' me my granddad died, fightin' Injuns 'round Fort Dodge somewheres."

"Sure," said Billy; "I'll tell 'em. Gee! Look who's comin' here," and as he spoke he flattened himself to the ground just as a bullet pinged against the rock above his head and the report of a rifle sounded from up the canyon. "That guy most got me. I'll have to be 'tendin' to business better'n this."

He drew himself slowly up upon his elbows, his carbine ready in his hand, and peered through a small aperture between two of the rocks which composed his breastwork. Then he stuck the muzzle of the weapon through, took aim and pulled the trigger.

"Didge get him?" asked Eddie.

"Yep," said Billy, and fired again. "Got that one too. Say, they're tough-lookin' guys; but I guess they won't come so fast next time. Those two were right in the open, workin' up to us on their bellies. They must a-thought we was sleepin'."

For an hour Billy neither saw nor heard any sign of the enemy, though several times he raised his hat above the breastwork upon the muzzle of his carbine to draw their fire.

It was midafternoon when the sound of distant rifle fire came faintly to the ears of the two men from somewhere far below them.

"The boys must be comin'," whispered Eddie Shorter hopefully.

For half an hour the firing continued and then silence again fell upon the mountains. Eddie began to wander mentally. He talked much of Kansas and his old home, and many times he begged for water.

"Buck up, kid," said Billy; "the boys'll be along in a minute now an' then we'll get you all the water you want."

But the boys did not come. Billy was standing up now, stretching his legs, and searching up and down the canyon for Indians. He was wondering if he could chance making a break for the valley where they stood some slight chance of meeting with their companions, and even as he considered the matter seriously there came a staccato report and Billy Byrne fell forward in a heap.

"God!" cried Eddie. "They got him now, they got him."

Byrne stirred and struggled to rise.

"Like'll they got me," he said, and staggered to his knees.

Over the breastwork he saw a half-dozen Indians running rapidly toward the shelter--he saw them in a haze of red that was caused not by blood but by anger. With an oath Billy Byrne leaped to his feet. From his knees up his whole body was exposed to the enemy; but Billy cared not. He was in a berserker rage. Whipping his carbine to his shoulder he let drive at the advancing Indians who were now beyond hope of cover. They must come on or be shot down where they were, so they came on, yelling like devils and stopping momentarily to fire upon the rash white man who stood so perfect a target before them.

But their haste spoiled their marksmanship. The bullets zinged and zipped against the rocky little fortress, they nicked Billy's shirt and trousers and hat, and all the while he stood there pumping lead into his assailants--not hysterically; but with the cool deliberation of a butcher slaughtering beeves.

One by one the Pimans dropped until but a single Indian rushed frantically upon the white man, and then the last of the assailants lunged forward across the breastwork with a bullet from Billy's carbine through his forehead.

Eddie Shorter had raised himself painfully upon an elbow that he might witness the battle, and when it was over he sank back, the blood welling from between his set teeth.

Billy turned to look at him when the last of the Pimans was disposed of, and seeing his condition kneeled beside him and took his head in the hollow of an arm.

"You orter lie still," he cautioned the Kansan. "Tain't good for you to move around much."

"It was worth it," whispered Eddie. "Say, but that was some scrap. You got your nerve standin' up there against the bunch of 'em; but if you hadn't they'd have rushed us and some of 'em would a-got in."

"Funny the boys don't come," said Billy.

"Yes," replied Eddie, with a sigh; "it's milkin' time now, an' I figgered on goin' to Shawnee this evenin'. Them's nice cookies, maw. I--"

Billy Byrne was bending low to catch his feeble words, and when the voice trailed out into nothingness he lowered the tousled red head to the hard earth and turned away.

Could it be that the thing which glistened on the eyelid of the toughest guy on the West Side was a tear?

The afternoon waned and night came, but it brought to Billy Byrne neither renewed attack nor succor. The bullet which had dropped him momentarily had but creased his forehead. Aside from the fact that he was blood covered from the wound it had inconvenienced him in no way, and now that darkness had fallen he commenced to plan upon leaving the shelter.

First he transferred Eddie's ammunition to his own person, and such valuables and trinkets as he thought "maw" might be glad to have, then he removed the breechblock from Eddie's carbine and stuck it in his pocket that the weapon might be valueless to the Indians when they found it.

"Sorry I can't bury you old man," was Billy's parting comment, as he climbed over the breastwork and melted into the night.

Billy Byrne moved cautiously through the darkness, and he moved not in the direction of escape and safety but directly up the canyon in the way that the village of the Pimans lay.

Soon he heard the sound of voices and shortly after saw the light of cook fires playing upon bronzed faces and upon the fronts of low huts. Some women were moaning and wailing. Billy guessed that they mourned for those whom his bullets had found earlier in the day. In the darkness of the night, far up among the rough, forbidding mountains it was all very weird and uncanny.

Billy crept closer to the village. Shelter was abundant. He saw no sign of sentry and wondered why they should be so lax in the face of almost certain attack. Then it occurred to him that possibly the firing he and Eddie had heard earlier in the day far down among the foothills might have meant the extermination of the Americans from El Orobo.

"Well, I'll be next then," mused Billy, and wormed closer to the huts. His eyes were on the alert every instant, as were his ears; but no sign of that which he sought rewarded his keenest observation.

Until midnight he lay in concealment and all that time the mourners continued their dismal wailing. Then, one by one, they entered their huts, and silence reigned within the village.

Billy crept closer. He eyed each hut with longing, wondering gaze. Which could it be? How could he determine? One seemed little more promising than the others. He had noted those to which Indians had retired. There were three into which he had seen none go. These, then, should be the first to undergo his scrutiny.

The night was dark. The moon had not yet risen. Only a few dying fires cast a wavering and uncertain light upon the scene. Through the shadows Billy Byrne crept closer and closer. At last he lay close beside one of the huts which was to be the first to claim his attention.

For several moments he lay listening intently for any sound which might come from within; but there was none. He crawled to the doorway and peered within. Utter darkness shrouded and hid the interior.

Billy rose and walked boldly inside. If he could see no one within, then no one could see him once he was inside the door. Therefore, so reasoned Billy Byrne, he would have as good a chance as the occupants of the hut, should they prove to be enemies.

He crossed the floor carefully, stopping often to listen. At last he heard a rustling sound just ahead of him. His fingers tightened upon the revolver he carried in his right hand, by the barrel, clublike. Billy had no intention of making any more noise than necessary.

Again he heard a sound from the same direction. It was not at all unlike the frightened gasp of a woman. Billy emitted a low growl, in fair imitation of a prowling dog that has been disturbed.

Again the gasp, and a low: "Go away!" in liquid feminine tones--and in English!

Billy uttered a low: "S-s-sh!" and tiptoed closer. Extending his hands they presently came in contact with a human body which shrank from him with another smothered cry.

"Barbara!" whispered Billy, bending closer.

A hand reached out through the darkness, found him, and closed upon his sleeve.

"Who are you?" asked a low voice.

"Billy," he replied. "Are you alone in here?"

"No, an old woman guards me," replied the girl, and at the same time they both heard a movement close at hand, and something scurried past them to be silhouetted for an instant against the path of lesser darkness which marked the location of the doorway.

"There she goes!" cried Barbara. "She heard you and she has gone for help."

"Then come!" said Billy, seizing the girl's arm and dragging her to her feet; but they had scarce crossed half the distance to the doorway when the cries of the old woman without warned them that the camp was being aroused.

Billy thrust a revolver into Barbara's hand. "We gotta make a fight of it, little girl," he said. "But you'd better die than be here alone."

As they emerged from the hut they saw warriors running from every doorway. The old woman stood screaming in Piman at the top of her lungs. Billy, keeping Barbara in front of him that he might shield her body with his own, turned directly out of the village. He did not fire at first hoping that they might elude detection and thus not draw the fire of the Indians upon them; but he was doomed to disappointment, and they had taken scarcely a dozen steps when a rifle spoke above the noise of human voices and a bullet whizzed past them.



Then Billy replied, and Barbara, too, from just behind his shoulder. Together they backed away toward the shadow of the trees beyond the village and as they went they poured shot after shot into the village.

The Indians, but just awakened and still half stupid from sleep, did not know but that they were attacked by a vastly superior force, and this fear held them in check for several minutes--long enough for Billy and Barbara to reach the summit of the bluff from which Billy and Eddie had first been fired upon.

Here they were hidden from the view of the Indians, and Billy broke at once into a run, half carrying the girl with a strong arm about her waist.

"If we can reach the foothills," he said, "I think we can dodge 'em, an' by goin' all night we may reach the river and El Orobo by morning. It's a long hike, Barbara, but we gotta make it--we gotta, for if daylight finds us in the Piman country we won't never make it. Anyway," he concluded optimistically, "it's all down hill."

"We'll make it, Billy," she replied, "if we can get past the sentry."

"What sentry?" asked Billy. "I didn't see no sentry when I come in."

"They keep a sentry way down the trail all night," replied the girl. "In the daytime he is nearer the village--on the top of this bluff, for from here he can see the whole valley; but at night they station him farther away in a narrow part of the trail."

"It's a mighty good thing you tipped me off," said Billy; "for I'd a-run right into him. I thought they was all behind us now."

After that they went more cautiously, and when they reached the part of the trail where the sentry might be expected to be found, Barbara warned Billy of the fact. Like two thieves they crept along in the shadow of the canyon wall. Inwardly Billy cursed the darkness of the night which hid from view everything more than a few paces from them; yet it may have been this very darkness which saved them, since it hid them as effectually from an enemy as it hid the enemy from them. They had reached the point where Barbara was positive the sentry should be. The girl was clinging tightly to Billy's left arm. He could feel the pressure of her fingers as they sunk into his muscles, sending little tremors and thrills through his giant frame. Even in the face of death Billy Byrne could sense the ecstasies of personal contact with this girl--the only woman he ever had loved or ever would.

And then a black shadow loomed before them, and a rifle flashed in their faces without a word or a sign of warning.