

CHAPTER XVII. "YOU ARE MY GIRL!"

MR. ANTHONY HARDING was pacing back and forth the length of the veranda of the ranchhouse at El Orobo waiting for some word of hope from those who had ridden out in search of his daughter, Barbara. Each swirling dust devil that eddied across the dry flat on either side of the river roused hopes within his breast that it might have been spurred into activity by the hoofs of a pony bearing a messenger of good tidings; but always his hopes were dashed, for no horseman emerged from the heat haze of the distance where the little dust devils raced playfully among the cacti and the greasewood.

But at last, in the northwest, a horseman, unheralded by gyrating dust column, came into sight. Mr. Harding shook his head sorrowfully. It had not been from this direction that he had expected word of Barbara, yet he kept his eyes fastened upon the rider until the latter reined in at the ranchyard and loped a tired and sweating pony to the foot of the veranda steps. Then Mr. Harding saw who the newcomer was.

"Bridge!" he exclaimed. "What brings you back here? Don't you know that you endanger us as well as yourself by being seen here? General Villa will think that we have been harboring you."

Bridge swung from the saddle and ran up onto the veranda. He paid not the slightest attention to Anthony Harding's protest.

"How many men you got here that you can depend on?" he asked.

"None," replied the Easterner. "What do you mean?"

"None!" cried Bridge, incredulity and hopelessness showing upon his countenance. "Isn't there a Chinaman and a couple of faithful Mexicans?"

"Oh, yes, of course," assented Mr. Harding; "but what are you driving at?"

"Pesita is on his way here to clean up El Orobo. He can't be very far behind me. Call the men you got, and we'll get together all the guns and ammunition on the ranch, and barricade the ranchhouse. We may be able to stand 'em off. Have you heard anything of Miss Barbara?"

Anthony Harding shook his head sadly.

"Then we'll have to stay right here and do the best we can," said Bridge. "I was thinking we might make a run for it if Miss Barbara was here; but as she's not we must wait for those who went out after her."

Mr. Harding summoned the two Mexicans while Bridge ran to the cookhouse and ordered the Chinaman to the ranchhouse. Then the erstwhile bookkeeper ransacked the bunkhouse for arms and ammunition. What little he found he carried to the ranchhouse, and with the help of the others barricaded the doors and windows of the first floor.

"We'll have to make our fight from the upper windows," he explained to the ranch owner. "If Pesita doesn't bring too large a force we may be able to stand them off until you can get help from Cuivaca. Call up there now and see if you can get Villa to send help--he ought to protect you from Pesita. I understand that there is no love lost between the two."

Anthony Harding went at once to the telephone and rang for the central at Cuivaca.

"Tell it to the operator," shouted Bridge who stood peering through an opening in the barricade before a front window; "they are coming now, and the chances are that the first thing they'll do is cut the telephone wires."

The Easterner poured his story and appeal for help into the ears of the girl at the other end of the line, and then for a few moments there was silence in the room as he listened to her reply.

"Impossible!" and "My God! it can't be true," Bridge heard the older man ejaculate, and then he saw him hang up the receiver and turn from the instrument, his face drawn and pinched with an expression of utter hopelessness.

"What's wrong?" asked Bridge.

"Villa has turned against the Americans," replied Harding, dully. "The operator evidently feels friendly toward us, for she warned me not to appeal to Villa and told me why. Even now, this minute, the man has a force of twenty-five hundred ready to march on Columbus, New Mexico. Three Americans were hanged in Cuivaca this afternoon. It's horrible, sir! It's horrible! We are as good as dead this very minute. Even if we stand off Pesita we can never escape to the border through Villa's forces."

"It looks bad," admitted Bridge. "In fact it couldn't look much worse; but here we are, and while our ammunition holds out about all we can do is stay here and use it. Will you men stand by us?" he addressed the Chinaman and the two Mexicans, who assured him that they had no love for Pesita and would fight for Anthony Harding in preference to going over to the enemy.

"Good!" exclaimed Bridge, "and now for upstairs. They'll be howling around here in about five minutes, and we want to give them a reception they won't forget."

He led the way to the second floor, where the five took up positions near the front windows. A short distance from the ranchhouse they could see the enemy, consisting of a detachment of some twenty of Pesita's troopers riding at a brisk trot in their direction.

"Pesita's with them," announced Bridge, presently. "He's the little fellow on the sorrel. Wait until they are close up, then give them a few rounds; but go easy on the ammunition--we haven't any too much."

Pesita, expecting no resistance, rode boldly into the ranchyard. At the bunkhouse and the office his little force halted while three or four troopers dismounted and entered the buildings in search of victims. Disappointed there they moved toward the ranchhouse.

"Lie low!" Bridge cautioned his companions. "Don't let them see you, and wait till I give the word before you fire."

On came the horsemen at a slow walk. Bridge waited until they were within a few yards of the house, then he cried: "Now! Let 'em have it!" A rattle of rifle fire broke from the upper windows into the ranks of the Pesitistas. Three troopers reeled and slipped from their saddles. Two horses dropped in their tracks. Cursing and yelling, the balance of the horsemen wheeled and galloped away in the direction of the office building, followed by the fire of the defenders.

"That wasn't so bad," cried Bridge. "I'll venture a guess that Mr. Pesita is some surprised--and sore. There they go behind the office. They'll stay there a few minutes talking it over and getting up their courage to try it again. Next time they'll come from another direction. You two," he continued, turning to the Mexicans, "take positions on the east and south sides of the house. Sing can remain here with Mr. Harding. I'll take the north side facing the office. Shoot at the first man who shows his head. If we can hold them off until dark we may be able to get away. Whatever happens don't let one of them get close enough to fire the house. That's what they'll try for."

It was fifteen minutes before the second attack came. Five dismounted troopers made a dash for the north side of the house; but when Bridge dropped the first of them before he had taken ten steps from the office building and wounded a second the others retreated for shelter.

Time and again as the afternoon wore away Pesita made attempts to get men close up to the house; but in each instance they were driven back, until at last

they desisted from their efforts to fire the house or rush it, and contented themselves with firing an occasional shot through the windows opposite them.

"They're waiting for dark," said Bridge to Mr. Harding during a temporary lull in the hostilities, "and then we're goners, unless the boys come back from across the river in time."

"Couldn't we get away after dark?" asked the Easterner.

"It's our only hope if help don't reach us," replied Bridge.

But when night finally fell and the five men made an attempt to leave the house upon the side away from the office building they were met with the flash of carbines and the ping of bullets. One of the Mexican defenders fell, mortally wounded, and the others were barely able to drag him within and replace the barricade before the door when five of Pesita's men charged close up to their defenses. These were finally driven off and again there came a lull; but all hope of escape was gone, and Bridge reposted the defenders at the upper windows where they might watch every approach to the house.

As the hours dragged on the hopelessness of their position grew upon the minds of all. Their ammunition was almost gone--each man had but a few rounds remaining--and it was evident that Pesita, through an inordinate desire for revenge, would persist until he had reduced their fortress and claimed the last of them as his victim.

It was with such cheerful expectations that they awaited the final assault which would see them without ammunition and defenseless in the face of a cruel and implacable foe.

It was just before daylight that the anticipated rush occurred. From every side rang the reports of carbines and the yells of the bandits. There were scarcely more than a dozen of the original twenty left; but they made up for their depleted numbers by the rapidity with which they worked their firearms and the loudness and ferocity of their savage cries.

And this time they reached the shelter of the veranda and commenced battering at the door.

At the report of the rifle so close to them Billy Byrne shoved Barbara quickly to one side and leaped forward to close with the man who barred their way to liberty.

That they had surprised him even more than he had them was evidenced by the wildness of his shot which passed harmlessly above their heads as well as by the fact that he had permitted them to come so close before engaging them.

To the latter event was attributable his undoing, for it permitted Billy Byrne to close with him before the Indian could reload his antiquated weapon. Down the two men went, the American on top, each striving for a death-hold; but in weight and strength and skill the Piman was far outclassed by the trained fighter, a part of whose daily workouts had consisted in wrestling with proficient artists of the mat.

Barbara Harding ran forward to assist her champion but as the men rolled and tumbled over the ground she could find no opening for a blow that might not endanger Billy Byrne quite as much as it endangered his antagonist; but presently she discovered that the American required no assistance. She saw the Indian's head bending slowly forward beneath the resistless force of the other's huge muscles, she heard the crack that announced the parting of the vertebrae and saw the limp thing which had but a moment before been a man, pulsing with life and vigor, roll helplessly aside--a harmless and inanimate lump of clay.

Billy Byrne leaped to his feet, shaking himself as a great mastiff might whose coat had been ruffled in a fight.

"Come!" he whispered. "We gotta beat it now for sure. That guy's shot'll lead 'em right down to us," and once more they took up their flight down toward the valley, along an unknown trail through the darkness of the night.

For the most part they moved in silence, Billy holding the girl's arm or hand to steady her over the rough and dangerous portions of the path. And as they went there grew in Billy's breast a love so deep and so resistless that he found himself wondering that he had ever imagined that his former passion for this girl was love.

This new thing surged through him and over him with all the blind, brutal, compelling force of a mighty tidal wave. It battered down and swept away the frail barriers of his new-found gentleness. Again he was the Mucker--hating the artificial wall of social caste which separated him from this girl; but now he was ready to climb the wall, or, better still, to batter it down with his huge fists. But the time was not yet--first he must get Barbara to a place of safety.

On and on they went. The night grew cold. Far ahead there sounded the occasional pop of a rifle. Billy wondered what it could mean and as they approached the ranch and he discovered that it came from that direction he hastened their steps to even greater speed than before.

"Somebody's shootin' up the ranch," he volunteered. "Wonder who it could be."

"Suppose it is your friend and general?" asked the girl.

Billy made no reply. They reached the river and as Billy knew not where the fords lay he plunged in at the point at which the water first barred their progress and dragging the girl after him, plowed bull-like for the opposite shore. Where the water was above his depth he swam while Barbara clung to his shoulders. Thus they made the passage quickly and safely.

Billy stopped long enough to shake the water out of his carbine, which the girl had carried across, and then forged ahead toward the ranchhouse from which the sounds of battle came now in increased volume.

And at the ranchhouse "hell was popping." The moment Bridge realized that some of the attackers had reached the veranda he called the surviving Mexican and the Chinaman to follow him to the lower floor where they might stand a better chance to repel this new attack. Mr. Harding he persuaded to remain upstairs.

Outside a dozen men were battering to force an entrance. Already one panel had splintered, and as Bridge entered the room he could see the figures of the bandits through the hole they had made. Raising his rifle he fired through the aperture. There was a scream as one of the attackers dropped; but the others only increased their efforts, their oaths, and their threats of vengeance.

The three defenders poured a few rounds through the sagging door, then Bridge noted that the Chinaman ceased firing.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Allee gonee," replied Sing, pointing to his ammunition belt.

At the same instant the Mexican threw down his carbine and rushed for a window on the opposite side of the room. His ammunition was exhausted and with it had departed his courage. Flight seemed the only course remaining. Bridge made no effort to stop him. He would have been glad to fly, too; but he could not leave Anthony Harding, and he was sure that the older man would prove unequal to any sustained flight on foot.

"You better go, too, Sing," he said to the Chinaman, placing another bullet through the door; "there's nothing more that you can do, and it may be that they are all on this side now--I think they are. You fellows have fought splendidly. Wish I could give you something more substantial than thanks; but that's all I have now and shortly Pesita won't even leave me that much."

"Allee light," replied Sing cheerfully, and a second later he was clambering through the window in the wake of the loyal Mexican.

And then the door crashed in and half a dozen troopers followed by Pesita himself burst into the room.

Bridge was standing at the foot of the stairs, his carbine clubbed, for he had just spent his last bullet. He knew that he must die; but he was determined to make them purchase his life as dearly as he could, and to die in defense of Anthony Harding, the father of the girl he loved, even though hopelessly.

Pesita saw from the American's attitude that he had no more ammunition. He struck up the carbine of a trooper who was about to shoot Bridge down.

"Wait!" commanded the bandit. "Cease firing! His ammunition is gone. Will you surrender?" he asked of Bridge.

"Not until I have beaten from the heads of one or two of your friends," he replied, "that which their egotism leads them to imagine are brains. No, if you take me alive, Pesita, you will have to kill me to do it."

Pesita shrugged. "Very well," he said, indifferently, "it makes little difference to me--that stairway is as good as a wall. These brave defenders of the liberty of poor, bleeding Mexico will make an excellent firing squad. Attention, my children! Ready! Aim!"

Eleven carbines were leveled at Bridge. In the ghastly light of early dawn the sallow complexions of the Mexicans took on a weird hue. The American made a wry face, a slight shudder shook his slender frame, and then he squared his shoulders and looked Pesita smilingly in the face.

The figure of a man appeared at the window through which the Chinaman and the loyal Mexican had escaped. Quick eyes took in the scene within the room.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Cut the rough stuff!" and leaped into the room.

Pesita, surprised by the interruption, turned toward the intruder before he had given the command to fire. A smile lit his features when he saw who it was.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "my dear Captain Byrne. Just in time to see a traitor and a spy pay the penalty for his crimes."

"Nothin' doin'," growled Billy Byrne, and then he threw his carbine to his shoulder and took careful aim at Pesita's face.

How easy it would have been to have hesitated a moment in the window before he made his presence known--just long enough for Pesita to speak the single word that would have sent eleven bullets speeding into the body of the man who loved Barbara and whom Billy believed the girl loved. But did such a thought occur to Billy Byrne of Grand Avenue? It did not. He forgot every other consideration beyond his loyalty to a friend. Bridge and Pesita were looking at him in wide-eyed astonishment.

"Lay down your carbines!" Billy shot his command at the firing squad. "Lay 'em down or I'll bore Pesita. Tell 'em to lay 'em down, Pesita. I gotta bead on your beazer."

Pesita did as he was bid, his yellow face pasty with rage.

"Now their cartridge belts!" snapped Billy, and when these had been deposited upon the floor he told Bridge to disarm the bandit chief.

"Is Mr. Harding safe?" he asked of Bridge, and receiving an affirmative he called upstairs for the older man to descend.

As Mr. Harding reached the foot of the stairs Barbara entered the room by the window through which Billy had come--a window which opened upon the side veranda.

"Now we gotta hike," announced Billy. "It won't never be safe for none of you here after this, not even if you do think Villa's your friend--which he ain't the friend of no American."

"We know that now," said Mr. Harding, and repeated to Billy that which the telephone operator had told him earlier in the day.

Marching Pesita and his men ahead of them Billy and the others made their way to the rear of the office building where the horses of the bandits were tethered. They were each armed now from the discarded weapons of the raiders, and well supplied with ammunition. The Chinaman and the loyal Mexican also discovered themselves when they learned that the tables had been turned upon Pesita. They, too, were armed and all were mounted, and when Billy had loaded the remaining weapons upon the balance of the horses the party rode away, driving Pesita's live stock and arms ahead of them.

"I imagine," remarked Bridge, "that you've rather discouraged pursuit for a while at least," but pursuit came sooner than they had anticipated.

They had reached a point on the river not far from Jose's when a band of horsemen appeared approaching from the west. Billy urged his party to greater

speed that they might avoid a meeting if possible; but it soon became evident that the strangers had no intention of permitting them to go unchallenged, for they altered their course and increased their speed so that they were soon bearing down upon the fugitives at a rapid gallop.

"I guess," said Billy, "that we'd better open up on 'em. It's a cinch they ain't no friends of ours anywhere in these parts."

"Hadn't we better wait a moment," said Mr. Harding; "we do not want to chance making any mistake."

"It ain't never a mistake to shoot a Dago," replied Billy. His eyes were fastened upon the approaching horsemen, and he presently gave an exclamation of recognition. "There's Rozales," he said. "I couldn't mistake that beanpole nowhere. We're safe enough in takin' a shot at 'em if Rosie's with 'em. He's Pesita's head guy," and he drew his revolver and took a single shot in the direction of his former comrades. Bridge followed his example. The oncoming Pesitistas reined in. Billy returned his revolver to its holster and drew his carbine.

"You ride on ahead," he said to Mr. Harding and Barbara. "Bridge and I'll bring up the rear."

Then he stopped his pony and turning took deliberate aim at the knot of horsemen to their left. A bandit tumbled from his saddle and the fight was on.

Fortunately for the Americans Rozales had but a handful of men with him and Rozales himself was never keen for a fight in the open.

All morning he hovered around the rear of the escaping Americans; but neither side did much damage to the other, and during the afternoon Billy noticed that Rozales merely followed within sight of them, after having dispatched one of his men back in the direction from which they had come.

"After reinforcements," commented Byrne.

All day they rode without meeting with any roving bands of soldiers or bandits, and the explanation was all too sinister to the Americans when coupled with the knowledge that Villa was to attack an American town that night.

"I wish we could reach the border in time to warn 'em," said Billy; "but they ain't no chance. If we cross before sunup tomorrow morning we'll be doin' well."

He had scarcely spoken to Barbara Harding all day, for his duties as rear guard had kept him busy; nor had he conversed much with Bridge, though he had often

eyed the latter whose gaze wandered many times to the slender, graceful figure of the girl ahead of them.

Billy was thinking as he never had thought before. It seemed to him a cruel fate that had so shaped their destinies that his best friend loved the girl Billy loved. That Bridge was ignorant of Billy's infatuation for her the latter well knew. He could not blame Bridge, nor could he, upon the other hand, quite reconcile himself to the more than apparent adoration which marked his friend's attitude toward Barbara.

As daylight waned the fugitives realized from the shuffling gait of their mounts, from drooping heads and dull eyes that rest was imperative. They themselves were fagged, too, and when a ranchhouse loomed in front of them they decided to halt for much-needed recuperation.

Here they found three Americans who were totally unaware of Villa's contemplated raid across the border, and who when they were informed of it were doubly glad to welcome six extra carbines, for Barbara not only was armed but was eminently qualified to expend ammunition without wasting it.

Rozales and his small band halted out of range of the ranch; but they went hungry while their quarry fed themselves and their tired mounts.

The Clark brothers and their cousin, a man by the name of Mason, who were the sole inhabitants of the ranch counseled a long rest--two hours at least, for the border was still ten miles away and speed at the last moment might be their sole means of salvation.

Billy was for moving on at once before the reinforcements, for which he was sure Rozales had dispatched his messenger, could overtake them. But the others were tired and argued, too, that upon jaded ponies they could not hope to escape and so they waited, until, just as they were ready to continue their flight, flight became impossible.

Darkness had fallen when the little party commenced to resaddle their ponies and in the midst of their labors there came a rude and disheartening interruption. Billy had kept either the Chinaman or Bridge constantly upon watch toward the direction in which Rozales' men lolled smoking in the dark, and it was the crack of Bridge's carbine which awoke the Americans to the fact that though the border lay but a few miles away they were still far from safety.

As he fired Bridge turned in his saddle and shouted to the others to make for the shelter of the ranchhouse.

"There are two hundred of them," he cried. "Run for cover!"

Billy and the Clark brothers leaped to their saddles and spurred toward the point where Bridge sat pumping lead into the advancing enemy. Mason and Mr. Harding hurried Barbara to the questionable safety of the ranchhouse. The Mexican followed them, and Bridge ordered Sing back to assist in barricading the doors and windows, while he and Billy and the Clark boys held the bandits in momentary check.

Falling back slowly and firing constantly as they came the four approached the house while Pesita and his full band advanced cautiously after them. They had almost reached the house when Bridge lunged forward from his saddle. The Clark boys had dismounted and were leading their ponies inside the house. Billy alone noted the wounding of his friend. Without an instant's hesitation he slipped from his saddle, ran back to where Bridge lay and lifted him in his arms. Bullets were pattering thick about them. A horseman far in advance of his fellows galloped forward with drawn saber to cut down the gringos.

Billy, casting an occasional glance behind, saw the danger in time to meet it--just, in fact, as the weapon was cutting through the air toward his head. Dropping Bridge and dodging to one side he managed to escape the cut, and before the swordsman could recover Billy had leaped to his pony's side and seizing the rider about the waist dragged him to the ground.

"Rozales!" he exclaimed, and struck the man as he had never struck another in all his life, with the full force of his mighty muscles backed by his great weight, with clenched fist full in the face.

There was a spurting of blood and a splintering of bone, and Captain Guillermo Rozales sank senseless to the ground, his career of crime and rapine ended forever.

Again Billy lifted Bridge in his arms and this time he succeeded in reaching the ranchhouse without opposition though a little crimson stream trickled down his left arm to drop upon the face of his friend as he deposited Bridge upon the floor of the house.

All night the Pesitistas circled the lone ranchhouse. All night they poured their volleys into the adobe walls and through the barricaded windows. All night the little band of defenders fought gallantly for their lives; but as day approached the futility of their endeavors was borne in upon them, for of the nine one was dead and three wounded, and the numbers of their assailants seemed undiminished.

Billy Byrne had been lying all night upon his stomach before a window firing out into the darkness at the dim forms which occasionally showed against the dull, dead background of the moonless desert.

Presently he leaped to his feet and crossed the floor to the room in which the horses had been placed.

"Everybody fire toward the rear of the house as fast as they can," said Billy. "I want a clear space for my getaway."

"Where you goin?" asked one of the Clark brothers.

"North," replied Billy, "after some of Funston's men on the border."

"But they won't cross," said Mr. Harding. "Washington won't let them."

"They gotta," snapped Billy Byrne, "an' they will when they know there's an American girl here with a bunch of Dagos yappin' around."

"You'll be killed," said Price Clark. "You can't never get through."

"Leave it to me," replied Billy. "Just get ready an' open that back door when I give the word, an' then shut it again in a hurry when I've gone through."

He led a horse from the side room, and mounted it.

"Open her up, boes!" he shouted, and "S'long everybody!"

Price Clark swung the door open. Billy put spurs to his mount and threw himself forward flat against the animal's neck. Another moment he was through and a rattling fusillade of shots proclaimed the fact that his bold feat had not gone unnoted by the foe.

The little Mexican pony shot like a bolt from a crossbow out across the level desert. The rattling of carbines only served to add speed to its frightened feet. Billy sat erect in the saddle, guiding the horse with his left hand and working his revolver methodically with his right.

At a window behind him Barbara Harding stood breathless and spellbound until he had disappeared into the gloom of the early morning darkness to the north, then she turned with a weary sigh and resumed her place beside the wounded Bridge whose head she bathed with cool water, while he tossed in the delirium of fever.

The first streaks of daylight were piercing the heavens, the Pesitistas were rallying for a decisive charge, the hopes of the little band of besieged were at low ebb when from the west there sounded the pounding of many hoofs.

"Villa," moaned Westcott Clark, hopelessly. "We're done for now, sure enough. He must be comin' back from his raid on the border."

In the faint light of dawn they saw a column of horsemen deploy suddenly into a long, thin line which galloped forward over the flat earth, coming toward them like a huge, relentless engine of destruction.

The Pesitistas were watching too. They had ceased firing and sat in their saddles forgetful of their contemplated charge.

The occupants of the ranchhouse were gathered at the small windows.

"What's them?" cried Mason--"them things floating over 'em."

"They're guidons!" exclaimed Price Clark "--the guidons of the United States cavalry regiment. See 'em! See 'em? God! but don't they look good?"

There was a wild whoop from the lungs of the advancing cavalrymen. Pesita's troops answered it with a scattering volley, and a moment later the Americans were among them in that famous revolver charge which is now history.

Daylight had come revealing to the watchers in the ranchhouse the figures of the combatants. In the thick of the fight loomed the giant figure of a man in nondescript garb which more closely resembled the apparel of the Pesitistas than it did the uniforms of the American soldiery, yet it was with them he fought. Barbara's eyes were the first to detect him.

"There's Mr. Byrne," she cried. "It must have been he who brought the troops."

"Why, he hasn't had time to reach the border yet," remonstrated one of the Clark boys, "much less get back here with help."

"There he is though," said Mr. Harding. "It's certainly strange. I can't understand what American troops are doing across the border--especially under the present administration."

The Pesitistas held their ground for but a moment then they wheeled and fled; but not before Pesita himself had forced his pony close to that of Billy Byrne.

"Traitor!" screamed the bandit. "You shall die for this," and fired point-blank at the American.

Billy felt a burning sensation in his already wounded left arm; but his right was still good.

"For poor, bleeding Mexico!" he cried, and put a bullet through Pesita's forehead.

Under escort of the men of the Thirteenth Cavalry who had pursued Villa's raiders into Mexico and upon whom Billy Byrne had stumbled by chance, the little party of fugitives came safely to United States soil, where all but one breathed sighs of heartfelt relief.

Bridge was given first aid by members of the hospital corps, who assured Billy that his friend would not die. Mr. Harding and Barbara were taken in by the wife of an officer, and it was at the quarters of the latter that Billy Byrne found her alone in the sitting-room.

The girl looked up as he entered, a sad smile upon her face. She was about to ask him of his wound; but he gave her no opportunity.

"I've come for you," he said. "I gave you up once when I thought it was better for you to marry a man in your own class. I won't give you up again. You're mine--you're my girl, and I'm goin' to take you with me. Were goin' to Galveston as fast as we can, and from there we're goin' to Rio. You belonged to me long before Bridge saw you. He can't have you. Nobody can have you but me, and if anyone tries to keep me from taking you they'll get killed."

He took a step nearer that brought him close to her. She did not shrink--only looked up into his face with wide eyes filled with wonder. He seized her roughly in his arms.

"You are my girl!" he cried hoarsely. "Kiss me!"

"Wait!" she said. "First tell me what you meant by saying that Bridge couldn't have me. I never knew that Bridge wanted me, and I certainly have never wanted Bridge. O Billy! Why didn't you do this long ago? Months ago in New York I wanted you to take me; but you left me to another man whom I didn't love. I thought you had ceased to care, Billy, and since we have been together here--since that night in the room back of the office--you have made me feel that I was nothing to you. Take me, Billy! Take me anywhere in the world that you go. I love you and I'll slave for you--anything just to be with you."

"Barbara!" cried Billy Byrne, and then his voice was smothered by the pressure of warm, red lips against his own.

A half hour later Billy stepped out into the street to make his way to the railroad station that he might procure transportation for three to Galveston. Anthony

Harding was going with them. He had listened to Barbara's pleas, and had finally volunteered to back Billy Byrne's flight from the jurisdiction of the law, or at least to a place where, under a new name, he could start life over again and live it as the son-in-law of old Anthony Harding should live.

Among the crowd viewing the havoc wrought by the raiders the previous night was a large man with a red face. It happened that he turned suddenly about as Billy Byrne was on the point of passing behind him. Both men started as recognition lighted their faces and he of the red face found himself looking down the barrel of a six-shooter.

"Put it up, Byrne," he admonished the other coolly. "I didn't know you were so good on the draw."

"I'm good on the draw all right, Flannagan," said Billy, "and I ain't drawin' for amusement neither. I gotta chance to get away and live straight, and have a little happiness in life, and, Flannagan, the man who tries to crab my game is goin' to get himself croaked. I'll never go back to stir alive. See?"

"Yep," said Flannagan, "I see; but I ain't tryin' to crab your game. I ain't down here after you this trip. Where you been, anyway, that you don't know the war's over? Why Coke Sheehan confessed a month ago that it was him that croaked Schneider, and the governor pardoned you about ten days ago."

"You stringin' me?" asked Billy, a vicious glint in his eyes.

"On the level," Flannagan assured him. "Wait, I gotta clippin' from the Trib in my clothes somewheres that gives all the dope."

He drew some papers from his coat pocket and handed one to Billy.

"Turn your back and hold up your hands while I read," said Byrne, and as Flannagan did as he was bid Billy unfolded the soiled bit of newspaper and read that which set him a-trembling with nervous excitement.

A moment later Detective Sergeant Flannagan ventured a rearward glance to note how Byrne was receiving the joyful tidings which the newspaper article contained.

"Well, I'll be!" ejaculated the sleuth, for Billy Byrne was already a hundred yards away and breaking all records in his dash for the sitting-room he had quitted but a few minutes before.

It was a happy and contented trio who took the train the following day on their way back to New York City after bidding Bridge good-bye in the improvised

hospital and exacting his promise that he would visit them in New York in the near future.

It was a month later; spring was filling the southland with new, sweet life. The joy of living was reflected in the song of birds and the opening of buds. Beside a slow-moving stream a man squatted before a tiny fire. A battered tin can, half filled with water stood close to the burning embers. Upon a sharpened stick the man roasted a bit of meat, and as he watched it curling at the edges as the flame licked it he spoke aloud though there was none to hear:

Just for a con I'd like to know (yes, he crossed over long ago; And he was right, believe me, bo!) if somewhere in the South, Down where the clouds lie on the sea, he found his sweet Penelope With buds of roses in her hair and kisses on her mouth.

"Which is what they will be singing about me one of these days," he commented.