

CHAPTER XIX

A DIFFICULT POSITION

And now Uncle John, finding himself left alone, took his walkingstick and started out to explore the valley.

He felt very sorry for young Ferralti, but believed his sympathy could in no way lighten the blow caused by the abrupt news of his parent's death. He would wish to be alone with his grief for a time. By and by Mr. Merrick intended to question his fellow prisoner and try to find out something of his history.

The dale was very beautiful as it lay basking in the afternoon sun. Near the house was a large vegetable garden, which, being now shaded by the overhanging cliffs, was being tended by a sour-visaged Sicilian. Uncle John watched him for a time, but the fellow paid no heed to him. Every servant connected with the duke's establishment seemed surly and morose, and this was the more remarkable because the country folk and villagers Uncle John had met were usually merry and light-hearted.

Down by the brook were green meadows and groves of fruit trees. The little gentleman followed the stream for some distance, and finally came upon a man seated on the bank above a broad pool, intently engaged in fishing. It proved to be the dandified old doctor, who wore gloves to

protect his hands and a broad-rimmed straw hat to shade his face.

Uncle John stood beside the motionless figure for a moment, watching the line. Then, forgetting he was in a foreign country, he asked carelessly:

"Any luck?"

"Not yet," was the quiet reply, in clear English. "It is too early to interest the fishes. An hour later they will bite."

"Then why did you come so soon?"

"To escape that hell-hole yonder," nodding his head toward the house.

Uncle John was surprised.

"But you are not a prisoner, doctor," he ventured to say.

"Except through the necessity of earning a livelihood. Il Duca pays well--or rather the Duchessa does, for she is the head of this household. I am skillful, and worth my price, and they know it."

"You say the Duchessa is the head of the house?"

"Assuredly, signore. Il Duca is her slave. She plans and directs everything, and her son but obeys her will."

"Did she send him to America?"

"I think so. But do not misunderstand me. The Duke is clever on his own account, and almost as wicked as his old mother. And between them they are training the child to be as bad as they are. It is dreadful."

"Have you been here long?"

"For seven years, signore."

"But you can resign whenever you please?"

"Why not? But the doubt makes me uneasy, sometimes. In another year I would like to go to Venice, and retire from professional life. I am a Venetian, you observe; no dastardly brigand of a Sicilian. And in another year I shall have sufficient means to retire and end my days in peace. Here I save every centesimo I make, for I can spend nothing."

Uncle John sat down upon the bank beside the confiding Venetian.

"Doctor," said he, "I am somewhat puzzled by this man you call Il Duca, as well as by my audacious capture and the methods employed to rob me. I'd like your advice. What shall I do?"

"The only possible thing, signore. Submit."

"Why is it the only possible thing?"

"Have you not yet discovered? Unless you pay, your friends will never hear from you again. Il Duca, by his mother's favor, is king here. He will murder you if you oppose his demands."

"Really?"

"It is quite certain, signore. He has murdered several obstinate people since I have been here, and the outside world will never know their fate. It is folly to oppose the king. Were you not rich you would not be here. Il Duca knows the exact wealth of every American who travels abroad and is likely to visit Sicily. Many escape him, but a few wander into his toils, for he is wonderfully sagacious. Mark you: he does not demand your all; he merely takes tribute, leaving his victims sufficient to render life desirable to them. If he required their all, many would as soon forfeit life as make the payment; but a tithe they will spare for the privilege of living. That is why he is so successful. And that is why he remains undisturbed. For an American, being robbed so simply, never tells of his humiliating experience. He goes home, and avoids Sicily ever after."

"H-m-m. I understand."

"But if you do not pay, you are not permitted to leave this place. You

are killed at once, and the incident is over. Il Duca does not love to murder, but he takes no chances."

"I see. But suppose I pay, and then make complaint to the Italian government?"

"It has been done, signore. But the government is very blind. It does not know Il Duca d' Alcanta. Its officials are convinced he does not exist. They investigate carefully, and declare the tale is all a myth."

"Then there is no way of escape?"

"Absolutely none. Such a condition is almost inconceivable, is it not? and in this enlightened age? But it exists, and is only harmful when its victims are stubborn and rebellious. To be cheerful and pay promptly is the only sensible way out of your difficulty."

"Thank you," said Uncle John. "I shall probably pay promptly. But tell me, to satisfy my curiosity, how does your duke murder his victims?"

"He does not call it murder, as I do; he says they are suicides, or the victims of accident. They walk along a path and fall into a pit. It is deep, and they are killed. The pit is also their tomb. They are forgotten, and the trap is already set for their successors."

"Rather a gloomy picture, doctor."

"Yes. I tell you this because my nature is kind. I abhor all crime, and much prefer that you should live. But, if you die, my salario continues. I am employed to guard the health of the Duke's family--especially the old Duchessa--and have no part in this detestable business."

"Isn't that a bite?"

"No, signore. It is the current. It is not time for the fish to bite."

Uncle John arose.

"Good afternoon, doctor."

"Good afternoon, signore."

He left the old fellow sitting there and walked on. The valley was about a half mile long and from a quarter to a third of a mile in width. It resembled a huge amphitheatre in shape.

The American tramped the length of the brook, which disappeared into the rocky wall at the far end. Then he returned through the orchards to the house.

The place was silent and seemed deserted. There was a languor in the

atmosphere that invited sleep. Uncle John sought his room and lay down for an afternoon nap, soon falling into a sound slumber.

When he awoke he found Ferralti seated beside his bed. The young man was pale, but composed.

"Mr. Merrick," said he, "what have you decided to do?"

Uncle John rubbed his eyes and sat up.

"I'm going to purchase that ring," he answered, "at the best price the Duke will make me."

"I am disappointed," returned Ferralti, stiffly. "I do not intend to allow myself to be robbed in this way."

"Then write a farewell letter, and I'll take it to your friends."

"It may not be necessary, sir."

Uncle John regarded him thoughtfully.

"What can you do?" he asked.

Ferralti leaned forward and whispered, softly: "I have a stout pocket-knife, with a very long blade. I shall try to kill the Duke. Once

he is dead his people will not dare to oppose us, but will fly in terror. It is only Il Duca's audacity and genius that enables this robber's den to exist."

"You would rather attempt this than pay?"

"Sir, I could not bear the infamy of letting this scoundrel triumph over me."

"Well, Ferralti, you are attempting a delicate and dangerous task, but so far as I can, I will help you."

He took the revolver from his pocket and handed it to his companion.

"It's loaded in every chamber," he whispered. "Perhaps it will serve your purpose better than a knife."

Ferralti's eyes sparkled.

"Good!" he exclaimed, concealing the weapon. "I shall watch for my opportunity, so as to make no mistake. Meantime, do you bargain with the Duke, but postpone any agreement to pay."

"All right, my lad. I'll wait to see what happens. It may add a good deal to the cost of that ring, if you fail; but I'll take the chances of that for the sake of the game."

He paused a moment, and then added:

"Is your father really dead, Count?"

"Yes; the Duke has sent me the cablegram he received from his agent. I cannot doubt his authority. My father and I have not been friendly, of late years. He was a severe man, cold and unsympathetic, but I am sorry we could not have been reconciled before this awful fate overtook him. However, it is now too late for vain regrets. I tried not to disobey or antagonize my one parent, but he did not understand my nature, and perhaps I failed to understand his."

He sighed, and rising from his chair walked to the window to conceal his emotion.

Uncle John remained silent, and presently Tommaso entered to notify them that dinner would be served in a half hour, and the Duke expected them to join him at the table.

The next morning Mr. Merrick bargained pleasantly with his jailer, who seemed not averse to discussing the matter at length; but no conclusion was reached. Ferralti took no part in the conversation, but remained sullen and silent, and the Duke did not press him.

The day after, however, he insisted that he had dallied long enough,

although after much argument on the part of his enforced guests he agreed to give them three days to decide, with the understanding that each day they delayed would add a goodly sum to their ransom. If at the end of the three days the Americans remained obdurate, he would invite them to take a little walk, and the affair would be terminated.

Ferralti hugged his revolver and awaited his opportunity. It seemed to Uncle John that he might have had a hundred chances to shoot the brigand, who merited no better fate than assassination at their hands; but although Ferralti was resolved upon the deed he constantly hesitated to accomplish it in cold blood, and the fact that he had three days grace induced him to put off the matter as long as possible.

He came to regret most bitterly his indecision; for something in the young man's eyes must have put the brigand on his guard. When they awoke on the third morning, which was the fifth since their imprisonment, some one had searched their rooms thoroughly. The revolver and the knife were both gone, and the loss rendered them absolutely helpless.