

CHAPTER XXI

THE PIT

They met an hour later at luncheon, all but the Duchessa, who sulked in her garden. Tato was bright and smiling, filled with a suppressed joy which bubbled up in spite of the little one's effort to be dignified and sedate. When her hand stole under the table to find and press that of her father, Uncle John beamed upon her approvingly; for he knew what had occurred and could sympathize with her delight.

The Duke, however, was more sombre than usual. He had defied his mother, successfully, so far; but he feared the terrible old woman more than did Tato, because he knew more of her history and of the bold and wicked deeds she had perpetrated in years gone by. Only once had a proposed victim escaped her, and that was when her own daughter Bianca had fallen in love with an American held for ransom and spirited him away from the valley through knowledge of the secret passage. It was well Bianca had fled with her lover; otherwise her mother would surely have killed her. But afterward, when the girl returned to die in the old home, all was forgiven, and only the hatred of her foreign husband, whose cruelty had driven her back to Sicily, remained to rankle in the old Duchessa's wicked heart.

No one knew her evil nature better than her son. He entertained a

suspicion that he had not conquered her by his recent opposition to her will. Indeed, he would never have dared to brave her anger except for Tato's sake. Tato was his idol, and in her defense the cowardly brigand had for the moment become bold.

Tato laughed and chatted with Uncle John all through the meal, even trying at times to cheer the doleful Ferralti, who was nearly as glum and unsociable as her father. The servants and brigands at the lower end of the table looked upon the little one admiringly. It was evident she was a general favorite.

On the porch, after luncheon, the Duke broached the subject of the ransoms again, still maintaining the fable of selling his antique jewelry.

"Sir," said Uncle John, "I'm going to submit gracefully, but upon one condition."

The Duke scowled.

"I allow no conditions," he said.

"You'd better allow this one," Uncle John replied, "because it will make it easier for all of us. Of my own free will and accord I will make a present to Tato of fifty thousand dollars, and she shall have it for her dowry when she marries."

Tato clapped her hands.

"How did you know I am a girl, when I wear boys' clothes?" she asked.

Even the duke smiled, at that, but the next moment he shook his head solemnly.

"It will not do, signore," he declared, answering Uncle John's proposition. "This is a business affair altogether. You must purchase the ring, and at once."

The little American sighed. It had been his last hope.

"Very well," he said; "have your own way."

"You will send to your friends for the money?"

"Whenever you say, Duke. You've got me in a hole, and I must wiggle out the best way I can."

The brigand turned to Ferralti.

"And you, signore?" he asked.

"I do not know whether I can get the money you demand."

"But you will make the attempt, as I shall direct?"

"Yes."

"Then, signori, it is all finished. In a brief time you will leave my hospitable roof."

"The sooner the better," declared Ferralti.

They sat for a time in silence, each busy with his thoughts.

"Go to your grandmother, Tato," said the Duke, "and try to make your peace with her. If she is too angry, do not remain. To-morrow you must go into town with letters from these gentlemen to their friends."

The child kissed him and went obediently to do his will. Then the brigand spoke to Tommaso, who brought writing material from the house and placed it upon a small table.

Uncle John, without further demur, sat down to write. The Duke dictated what he should say, although he was allowed to express the words in his own characteristic style, and he followed his instructions implicitly, secretly admiring the shrewdness of the brigand's methods.

It was now Ferralti's turn. He had just seated himself at the table and

taken the pen when they were startled by a shrill scream from the rear of the house. It was followed by another, and another, in quick succession.

It was Tato's voice, and the duke gave an answering cry and sprang from the veranda to dart quickly around the corner of the house. Uncle John followed him, nearly as fearful as the child's father.

Tommaso seized a short rifle that stood near and ran around the house in the other direction, when Ferralti, who for a moment had seemed dazed by the interruption, followed Tommaso rather than the others.

As they came to the rear they were amazed to see the old Duchessa, whom they had known to be feeble and dependent upon her women, rush through the garden hedge with the agility of a man, bearing in her arms the struggling form of little Tato.

The child screamed pitifully, but the woman glared upon Tommaso and Ferralti, as she passed them, with the ferocity of a tiger.

"She is mad!" cried Ferralti. "Quick, Tommaso; let us follow her."

The brigand bounded forward, with the young man scarce a pace behind him. The woman, running with wonderful speed in spite of her burden, began to ascend a narrow path leading up the face of a rugged cliff.

A yell of anguish from behind for a moment arrested Ferralti's rapid pursuit. Glancing back he saw the Duke running frantically toward them, at the same time waving his arms high above his head.

"The pit!" he shouted. "She is making for the pit. Stop her, for the love of God!"

Ferralti understood, and dashed forward again at full speed. Tommaso also understood, for his face was white and he muttered terrible oaths as he pressed on. Yet run as they might, the mad duchessa was inspired with a strength so superhuman that she kept well in advance.

But the narrow path ended half way up the cliff. It ended at a deep chasm in the rocks, the edge of which was protected by a large flat stone, like the curb of a well.

With a final leap the old woman gained this stone, and while the dreadful pit yawned at her feet she turned, and with a demoniacal laugh faced her pursuers, hugging the child close to her breast.

Tommaso and Ferralti, who were nearest, paused instinctively. It was now impossible for them to prevent the tragedy about to be enacted. The Duke, spurred on by fear, was yet twenty paces in their rear, and in a moment he also stopped, clasping his hands in a gesture of vain entreaty.

"Listen, Lugui!" his mother called to him, in a dear, high voice. "This is the child that has come between us and turned you from a man into a coward. Here alone is the cause of our troubles. Behold! I will remove it forever from our path."

With the words she lifted Tato high above her head and turned toward the pit--that terrible cleft in the rocks which was believed to have no bottom.

At her first movement Tommaso had raised his gun, and the Duke, perceiving this, called to him in an agonized voice to fire. But either the brigand wavered between his loyalty to the Duke or the Duchessa, or he feared to injure Tato, for he hesitated to obey and the moments were precious.

The child's fate hung in the balance when Ferralti snatched the weapon from the brigand's hands and fired it so hastily that he scarcely seemed to take aim.

A wild cry echoed the shot. The woman collapsed and fell, dropping Tato at her feet, where they both tottered at the edge of the pit. The child, however, clung desperately to the outer edge of the flat stone, while the Duchessa's inert form seemed to hesitate for an instant and then disappeared from view.

Tommaso ran forward and caught up the child, returning slowly along the

path to place it in the father's arms. Ferralti was looking vaguely from the weapon he held to the pit, and then back again, as if not fully understanding what he had done.

"Thank you, signore," said the Duke, brokenly, "for saving my precious child."

"But I have slain your mother!" cried the young man, horrified.

"The obligation is even," replied the duke. "She was also your grandmother."

Ferralti stood motionless, his face working convulsively, his tongue refusing to utter a sound.

"But he did not shoot my grandmother at all," said Tato, who was sobbing against her father's breast; "for I heard the bullet strike the rock beside us. My grandmother's strength gave way, and she fainted. It was that that saved me, padre mia."