

CHAPTER XVII

THE HIDDEN VALLEY

Uncle John's first inspiration was to sit down upon a stone to think. He drew out his pipe and lighted it, to assist his meditations.

These were none too pleasant. That he had been cleverly entrapped, and that by a child scarcely in its teens, was too evident to need reflection. And what a secure trap it was! The mountains ranged all around the valley were impossible to scale, even by an Alpine climber, and to one who was not informed of its location the existence of the valley itself was unimaginable.

"I had not believed Ferralti was so shrewd," he muttered, wonderingly. "That something was wrong about the fellow I knew, of course; but I had not suspected such a thing as this. Now, then, first of all let me mark this spot, so that I will remember it. Just back of where I now stand is the entrance or outlet to the tunnel through the wall. It is closed, I suppose, by a swinging stone, like the one on the opposite side. I saw that one opened--opened by some person concealed from view, as soon as the boy sang his bit of song which was the signal agreed upon. And I was fool enough, after that warning, to walk straight through the tunnel! You're getting old, John Merrick; that's the only way I can account for your folly. But Ferralti hasn't won the odd trick yet, and if I keep my

wits about me he isn't likely to win."

Thus ruminating, Uncle John searched the rocky wall carefully and believed he would know the place again, although which of the rough stones of its surface formed the doorway to the tunnel he could not guess.

A ledge of rock served as a path leading to right and left around this end of the valley, or "pocket" in the mountain, as it could more properly be called. Uncle John turned to the right, striding along with his usual deliberation, smoking his pipe and swinging his cane as he approached the stone dwelling that formed the center of the little settlement. As yet no sign of human life had he observed since Tato had disappeared, although a few cows were standing in a green meadow and some goats scrambled among the loose rocks at the further end of the enclosure.

Around the house the grounds had been laid out in gardens, with flowers and shrubbery, hedges and shade trees scattered about. Chickens clucked and strutted along the paths and an air of restfulness and peace brooded over all.

Uncle John was plainly mystified until he drew quite close to the dwelling, which had many verandas and balconies and bore every evidence of habitation. Then, to his astonishment, he beheld the form of a man stretched lazily in a wicker chair beside the entrance, and while he

paused, hesitating, the man sat up and bowed politely to him.

"Good morning, Signor Merreek."

It was Victor Valdi, or, ignoring the fictitious name, the mysterious personage known as "Il Duca."

"Behold my delight, Signor Merreek, to receive you in my poor home," continued the man. "Will you not be seated, caro amico?"

The words were soft and fair, but the dark eyes gleamed with triumph and a sneer curled the thin lips.

"Thank you," said Uncle John; "I believe I will."

He stepped upon the veranda and sat down opposite his host.

"I came to see Count Ferralti, who is hurt, I understand," he continued.

"It is true, signore, but not badly. The poor count is injured mostly in his mind. Presently you shall see him."

"No hurry," observed Uncle John. "Pleasant place you have here, Duke."

"It is very good of you to praise it, signore. It is my most ancient patrimony, and quite retired and exclusive."

"So I see."

"The house you have honored by your presence, signore, was erected some three hundred and thirty years ago, by an ancestor who loved retirement. It has been in my family ever since. We all love retirement."

"Very desirable spot for a brigand, I'm sure," remarked the American, puffing his pipe composedly.

"Brigand? Ah, it pleases you to have humor, signore, mia. Brigand! But I will be frank. It is no dishonor to admit that my great ancestors of past centuries were truly brigands, and from this quiet haven sallied forth to do mighty deeds. They were quite famous, I am told, those olden Dukes d'Alcanta."

"I do not question it."

"Our legends tell of how my great ancestors demanded tribute of the rich who passed through their domain--for all this end of Sicily was given to us by Peter of Aragon, and remained in our possession until the second Ferdinand robbed us of it. Those times were somewhat wild and barbarous, signore, and a gentleman who protected his estates and asked tribute of strangers was termed a brigand, and became highly respected. But now it is different. We are civilized and meek, and ruled most lovingly by

Italy. They will tell you there is no brigandage in all Sicily."

"So I understand."

"To-day I am nobody. My very name is forgotten. Those around this mountain know nothing of my little estate, and I am content. I desire not glory: I desire not prominence; to live my life in seclusion, with the occasional visit of a friend like yourself, is enough to satisfy me."

"You seem well known in Taormina."

"Quite a mistake, signore."

"And the natives must have climbed these peaks at times and looked down into your secluded kingdom."

"If so, they have forgotten it."

"I see."

"I give to the churches and the poor, but in secret. If I have an enemy, he disappears--I do not know how; no one knows."

"Of course not. You are an improvement on your ancestors, Duke. Instead of being a brigand you belong to the Mafia, and perform your robberies

and murders in security. Very clever, indeed."

"But again you are wrong, signore," replied the Duke, with a frown. "I have never known of this Mafia, of which you speak, nor do I believe it exists. For myself, I am no robber, but a peaceful merchant."

"A merchant?" returned Uncle John, surprised by the statement.

"To be sure. I have some ancient and very valuable relics in my possession, treasured most carefully from the mediæval days. These I sell to my friends--who are fortunately all foreigners like yourself and can appreciate such treasures--and so obtain for myself and my family a modest livelihood."

"And you expect to sell something to me?" asked Uncle John, understanding very well the Sicilian's meaning.

"It is my earnest hope, signore."

The American fell silent, thinking upon the situation. The fierce looking brigand beside him was absurd enough, in his way, but doubtless a dangerous man to deal with. Uncle John was greatly interested in the adventure. It was such a sharp contrast to the hum-drum, unromantic American life he had latterly known that he derived a certain enjoyment from the novel experience. If the girls did not worry over his absence he would not much regret his visit to Il Duca's secluded valley.

It was already midday, and his nieces would be expecting him to luncheon. When he did not appear they would make enquiries, and try to find him. It occurred to him how futile all such attempts must prove. Even to one acquainted with the mountain paths the entrance to the duke's domain was doubtless a secret, and the brigand had plainly hinted that the native Sicilians were too cautious to spy upon him or molest him in any way.

So far, the only person he had seen was Il Duca himself. The child who had decoyed him was, of course, somewhere about, and so also was Ferralti. How many servants or followers the brigand might have was as yet a mystery to the new arrival.

In the side pocket of Uncle John's loose coat lay a loaded revolver, which he had carried ever since he had received Mr. Watson's warning letter. He had never imagined a condition of danger where he could not use this weapon to defend himself, and as long as it remained by him he had feared nothing. But he had been made a prisoner in so deft a manner that he had no opportunity to expostulate or offer any sort of resistance. Later there might be a chance to fight for his liberty, and the only sensible action was to wait and bide his time.

"For example," the Duke was saying, in his labored, broken English, "I have here a priceless treasure--very antique, very beautiful. It was in one time owned by Robert the Norman, who presented it to my greatest

ancestor."

He drew an odd-shaped ring from his pocket and handed it to the American. It was of dull gold and set with a half dozen flat-cut garnets. Perhaps antique; perhaps not; but of little intrinsic value.

"This ring I have decided to sell, and it shall be yours, Signor Merreek, at a price far less than is represented by its historic worth. I am sure you will be glad to buy it."

"For how much?" asked Uncle John, curiously.

"A trifle; a mere hundred thousand lira."

"Twenty thousand dollars!"

"The ring of King Roger. How cheap! But, nevertheless, you shall have it for that sum."

Uncle John smiled.

"My dear Duke," he replied, "you have made a sad mistake. I am a comparatively poor man. My fortune is very modest."

The brigand lay back in his chair and lighted a fresh cigarette.

"I fear you undervalue yourself, my dear guest," he said. "Recently have I returned from America, where I was told much of the wealth of Signor John Merreek, who is many times a millionaire. See," drawing a paper from his pocket, "here is a list of the stocks and securities you own. Also of government and railway bonds, of real estate and of manufactures controlled by your money. I will read, and you will correct me if an error occurs."

Uncle John listened and was amazed. The schedule was complete, and its total was many millions. It was a better list of holdings than Uncle John possessed himself.

"You foreigners make queer mistakes, Duke," said he, taking another tack. "This property belongs to another John Merrick. It is a common name, and that is doubtless why you mistook me for the rich John Merrick."

"I have noticed," returned the Duke, coldly, "that this strange delusion of mind is apt to overtake my guests. But do not be alarmed; it will pass away presently, and then you will realize that you are yourself. Remember that I crossed the Atlantic on your steamship, signore. Many people there on board spoke of you and pointed you out to me as the great man of finance. Your own niece that is called Patsy, she also told me much about you, and of your kindness to her and the other young signorini. Before I left New York a banker of much dignity informed me you would sail on the ship 'Princess Irene.' If a mistake has been made,

signore, it is yours, and not mine. Is your memory clearer now?"

Uncle John laughed frankly. The rascal was too clever for him to dispute with.

"Whoever I am," said he, "I will not buy your ring."

"I am pained," replied the brigand, lightly. "But there is ample time for you to reflect upon the matter. Do not decide hastily, I implore you. I may have been too liberal in making my offer, and time may assist me in fixing a just price for the relic. But we have had enough of business just now. It is time for our midday collation. Oblige me by joining us, signore."

He blew a shrill whistle, and a man stepped out of a doorway. He was an enormous Sicilian, tall, sinewy and with a countenance as dark and fierce as his master's. In his belt was a long knife, such as is known as a stiletto.

"Tommaso," said the Duke, "kindly show Signor Merreek to his room, and ask Guido if luncheon is ready to be served."

"Va bene, padrone," growled the man, and turned obediently to escort the American.

Uncle John entered the house, traversed a broad and cool passage,

mounted to the second floor and found himself in a pleasant room with a balcony overlooking the valley. It was comfortably furnished, and with a bow that was not without a certain grim respect the man left him alone and tramped down the stairs again. There had been no attempt to restrain his liberty or molest him in any way, yet he was not slow to recognize the fact that he was a prisoner. Not in the house, perhaps, but in the valley. There was no need to confine him more closely. He could not escape.

He bathed his hands and face, dried them on a fresh towel, and found his toilet table well supplied with conveniences. In the next room some one was pacing the floor like a caged beast, growling and muttering angrily at every step.

Uncle John listened. "The brigand seems to have more than one guest," he thought, and smiled at the other's foolish outbursts.

Then he caught a word or two of English that made him start. He went to the door between the two rooms and threw it open, finding himself face to face with Count Ferralti.