

## CHAPTER XX

### UNCLE JOHN PLAYS EAVESDROPPER

It now seemed to Uncle John that further resistance to the demands of Il Duca was as useless as it was dangerous. He resented the necessity of paying a ransom as much as any man could; but imprisoned as he was in a veritable "robbers' den," without means of communicating with the authorities or the outside world, and powerless to protect his life from the vengeance of the unprincipled scoundrel who held him, the only safe and sane mode of procedure was to give in as gracefully as possible.

He formed this conclusion during a long walk around the valley, during which he once more noted the absolute seclusion of the place and the impossibility of escape by scaling the cliffs. The doctor was fishing again by the brook, but paid no heed when Uncle John tramped by. The sight of the dapper little man gave Mr. Merrick a thought, and presently he turned back and sat down beside the fisherman.

"I want to get out of this," he said, bluntly. "It was fun, at first, and rather interesting; but I've had enough of it."

The physician kept his eye on the line and made no reply.

"I want you to tell me how to escape," continued Uncle John. "It's no

use saying that it can't be done, for nothing is impossible to a clever man, such as I believe you to be."

Still no reply.

"You spoke, the other day, of earning enough money to go home and live in peace for the rest of your days. Here, sir, is your opportunity to improve upon that ambition. The brigand is trying to exact a large ransom from me; I'll give it to you willingly--every penny--if you'll show me how to escape."

"Why should you do that?" enquired the doctor, still intent upon his line. "Does it matter to you who gets your money?"

"Of course," was the prompt reply. "In one case I pay it for a service rendered, and do it gladly. On the other hand, I am robbed, and that goes against the grain. Il Duca has finally decided to demand fifty thousand dollars. It shall be yours, instead, if you give me your assistance."

"Signore," said the other, calmly, "I would like this money, and I regret that it is impossible for me to earn it. But there is no means of escape from this place except by the passage through the rocks, which passage only three people know the secret of opening--Il Duca himself, the child Tato, and the old Duchessa. Perhaps Tommaso also knows; I am not certain; but he will not admit he has such knowledge. You see,

signore, I am as much a prisoner as yourself."

"There ought to be some way to climb these cliffs; some secret path or underground tunnel," remarked Uncle John, musingly.

"It is more than a hundred years since this valley was made secure by a brigand ancestor of our Duchessa," was the reply. "It may be two or three centuries ago, for all I know. And ever since it has been used for just this purpose: to hold a prisoner until he was ransomed--and no such man has ever left the place alive unless he paid the price."

"Then you cannot help me?" asked Uncle John, who was weary of hearing these pessimistic declarations.

"I cannot even help myself; for I may not resign my position here unless the Duke is willing I should go."

"Good morning, doctor."

The prisoner returned slowly toward the dwelling, with its group of outhouses. By chance he found a path leading to the rear of these which he had not traversed before, and followed it until he came to a hedge of thickly set trees of some variety of cactus, which seemed to have been planted to form an enclosure. Cautiously pushing aside the branches bordering a small gap in this hedge, Uncle John discovered a charming garden lying beyond, so he quickly squeezed himself through the opening

and entered.

The garden was rudely but not badly kept. There was even some attempt at ornamentation, and many of the shrubs and flowers were rare and beautiful. Narrow walks traversed the masses of foliage, and several leafy bowers invited one to escape the heat of the midday sun in their shelter. It was not a large place, and struck one as being overcrowded because so many of the plants were taller than a man's head.

Uncle John turned down one path which, after several curves and turns, came to an abrupt ending beneath the spreading branches of an acacia tree which had been converted into a bower by a thick, climbing vine, whose matted leaves and purple blossoms effectually screened off the garden beyond.

While he stood gazing around him to find a way out without retracing his steps, a clear voice within a few feet of him caused him to start. The voice spoke in vehement Italian, and came from the other side of the screen of vines. It was sharp and garrulous in tone, and although Uncle John did not understand the words he recognized their dominating accent.

The Duke replied, slowly and sullenly, and whatever he said had the effect of rousing the first speaker to fierce anger.

The American became curious. He found a place where the leaves were thinner than elsewhere, and carefully pressing them apart looked through

the opening. Beyond was a clear space, well shaded and furnished with comfortable settles, tables and chairs. It adjoined a wing of the dwelling, which stood but a few paces away and was evidently occupied by the women of the household. The old Duchessa, her face still like a death mask but her eyes glittering with the brightness of a serpent's, sat enthroned within a large chair in the center of a family group. It was her sharp voice that had first aroused the American's attention. Opposite her sat the Duke, his thin face wearing an expression of gloom and dissatisfaction. The child Tato occupied a stool at her father's feet, and in the background were three serving women, sewing or embroidering. Near the Duke stood the tall brigand known as Pietro.

Answering the old woman's fierce tirade, Tato said:

"It is foolish to quarrel in Italian. The servants are listening."

"Let us then speak in English," returned the Duchessa. "These are matters the servants should not gossip about."

The Duke nodded assent. Both Tato and her grandmother spoke easily the foreign tongue; the Duke was more uncertain in his English, but understood it perfectly.

"I am still the head of this family," resumed the Duchessa, in a more moderate tone. "I insist that my will be obeyed."

"Your dignity I have the respect for," replied the Duke, laboredly; "but you grow old and foolish."

"Foolish! I?"

"Yes; you are absurd. You live in past centuries. You think to-day we must do all that your ancestors did."

"Can you do better?"

"Yes; the world has change. It has progress. With it I advance, but you do not. You would murder, rob, torture to-day as the great Duke, your grandfather, did. You think we still are of the world independent. You think we are powerful and great. Bah! we are nothing--we are as a speck of dust. But still we are the outlaws and the outcasts of Sicily, and some day Italy will crush us and we will be forgotten."

"I dare them to molest us!"

"Because you are imbecile. The world you do not know. I have travel; I see many countries; and I am wise."

"But you are still my vassal, my slave; and I alone rule here. Always have you rebelled and wanted to escape. Only my iron will has kept you here and made you do your duty."

"Since you my brother Ridolfo killed, I have little stomach for the trade of brigand. It is true. But no longer is this trade necessary. We are rich. Had I a son to inherit your business, a different thought might prevail; but I have only Tato, and a girl cannot be a successful brigand."

"Why not?" cried the old Duchessa, contemptuously. "It is the girl--always the girl--you make excuses for. But have I not ruled our domain--I, who am a woman?"

Tato herself answered, in a quiet voice.

"And what have you become, nonna, more than an outcast?" she enquired.

"What use to you is money, or a power that the world would sneer at, did the world even suspect that you exist? You are a failure in life, my nonna, and I will not be like you."

The Duchessa screamed an epithet and glared at the child as if she would annihilate her; but no fitting words to reply could she find.

Uncle John smiled delightedly. He felt no sense of humiliation or revolt at eavesdropping in this den of thieves, and to be able to gain so fair a revelation of the inner life of this remarkable family was a diversion not lightly to be foregone.

"So far, we have managed to escape the law," resumed the Duke. "But

always it may not be our fortune to do this, if we continue this life. It is now a good time to stop. Of one American we will gain a quarter of a million lira--a fortune--and of the other one hundred and fifty thousand lira. With what we already have it is enough and more. Quietly we will disband our men and go away. In another land we live the respectable life, in peace with all, and Tato shall be the fine lady, and forget she once was a brigand's daughter."

The child sprang up in glee, and clasping her father's neck with both arms kissed him with passionate earnestness.

Silently the Duchessa watched the scene. Her face was as pallid and immobile as ever; even the eyes seemed to have lost expression. But the next words showed that she was still unconquered.

"You shall take the money of the fat pig of an American; it is well to do so. But the youth who boldly calls himself Ferralti shall make no tribute to this family. He shall die as I have declared."

"I will not take the risk," asserted the Duke, sourly.

"Have the others who lie in the pit told tales?" she demanded.

"No; but they died alone. Here are two Americans our prisoners, and they have many and powerful friends, both at Taormina and at Naples. The man Merrick, when he goes, will tell that Ferralti is here. To obtain



his person, alive or dead, the soldiers will come here and destroy us all. It is folly, and shows you are old and imbecile."

"Then go!" she cried, fiercely. "Go, you and Tato; take your money and escape. And leave me my valley, and the youth Ferralti, and my revenge. Then, if I die, if the soldiers destroy me, it is my own doing."

"In this new world, of which you know nothing, escape is not possible," replied the duke, after a moment's thought. "Ferralti must be accounted for, and because I captured him they would accuse me of his death, and even Tato might be made to suffer. No, madame. Both the Americans must be killed, or both set free for ransom."

Uncle John gave a start of dismay. Here was a development he had not expected.

"Then," said the old woman, positively, "let them both die."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Tato. "Not that, grandmother!"

"Certainly not so," agreed the Duke. "We want their money."

"You are already rich," said the Duchessa. "You have yourself said so, and I know it is truth."

"This new world," explained the Duke, "contains of luxuries many that

you have no understanding of. To be rich to-day requires more money than in your days, madre mia. With these ransoms, which already we have won, we shall have enough. Without this money my Tato would lack much that I desire for her. So of new murders I will take no risk, for the bambina's sake."

"And my revenge?"

"Bah, of what use is it? Because the boy's father married my sister Bianca, and ill-treated her, must we kill their offspring?"

"He is his father's son. The father, you say, is dead, and so also is my child Bianca. Then my hatred falls upon the son Arturo, and he must die to avenge the wrong to our race."

"More proof that you are imbecile," said the Duke, calmly. "He shall not die. He is nothing to us except a mine from whence to get gold."

"He is my grandson. I have a right to kill him."

"He is my nephew. He shall live."

"Do you defy me?"

"With certainty. I defy you. The new world permits no crazy nonna to rule a family. That is my privilege. If you persist, it is you who shall

go to the pit. If you have reason, you shall remain in your garden in peace. Come, Tato; we will retire."

He arose and took the child's hand. The old woman sat staring at them in silence, but with an evil glint in her glistening eyes.

Uncle John turned around and softly made his retreat from the garden. His face wore a startled and horrified expression and on his forehead stood great beads of sweat that the sultriness of the day did not account for.

But he thought better of Il Duca.