The Net"

- BY -Rex Beach

Author of

"The Ne'er Do Well," "The Spoilers," "The Silver Horde," "The Barrier," "Pardners," Etc.

All in all, Blake was quite taken | best friend under such conditions," aback, for he had not been prepared for such a vision, and a sort of panic robbed him of speech. when his halting tongue had rone its duty and his eyes had turned once more to the aunt, some irresistible power swept them back to the young woman's face. The more he observed her the more he was puzzled by that peculiar effect, that glow which seemed to envelop her. Even her gown, of some shimmering material, lent its part to the illusion. Yellow was undeniably her color; she seemed steeped in it.

It required a determined effort on his part to recover his composure. Savigno fell quickly into a lover's rhapsody, devouring the girl with ardent glances under which she thrilled and soon they began to chatter

of the wedding preparations. 'It was very good of you to come so long a way," said the Countess at last, turning to the American for the second time. "Martel has told us all about you and about your adventures together."

"Not all!" cried Savigno, lightly. "We have pasts, I assure you. "Martel tries to impress with his wickedness," the aunt explained.

But we know him to be jesting. Perhaps you will confound him here be-

"I shall do nothing of the sort," Blake laughed. "Who am I to rob him of a delightfully wicked past upon which he can pretend to look back in horror? It is the only past he will ever have, so why spoil it for him, I am prepared to lend a hand and to start him off with a list of damning disclosures which it will require years to live down."

Pray begin," urged the Count with an air of intense satisfaction. "Eh? He hesitates. Then I shall begin for him. In the first place Margherita, he openly declares that I covet your riches."

The Countess joined in the laughter at this, and Norvin could only say:
"I had not met you then, Signor-

"He was quite serious, nevertheless and predicted that marriage would end our friendship, arguing that supreme happiness is but another term for supreme selfishness."

"At least I did not question the certainty of your happiness." The girl spoke up gravely:

"I don't agree with you, Signore Blake. I should hate to think it will make us selfish. It seems to me that such-love as we share will make us

good and sweet and generous." When she spoke of love she hesitated and lowered her eyes until the quivering lashes swept her cheeks, but no flush of embarrassment followed. Norvin realized that with all reserve she could not blush, had probably never blushed.

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he told her, "for he covers his chagrin at losing a comrade by a display But pessimism which he doesn't really

> Norvin suddenly wished the Countess would not allow her glance to linger upon him so long and searchingly. It filled him with most disturbing self-consciousness. He was relieved when the Donna Teresa engaged him in conversation and the overs were occupied with each other. It was some time later that the Countess addressed her aunt excitedly:

"Listen! What do you think this, zia mia? The authorities will not admit poor Paolo to bail and he is still in prison."

"Poor fellow!" cried the Donna Teresa. "It is La Mafia." "Perhaps it is better for him to re main where he is," martel said. "He

is at least safe for the time being. Here is something you me not know; Galli's wife is sister to Gian Narcone.' "The outlaw?" "Then she will probably kill Paolo,"

said the Countess Margherita calm-Blake exclaimed wonderinly: "I

say-this is worse than Brethitt County, Kentucky. You talk of outlaws and murders as we discuss the cotton crop or the bollweevil. This s the most fatal country I ever saw."

"It is a great pity that such things exist," the Donna Teresa agreed, but one grows accustomed to them in time. It has been so ever since I was a child-we do not seem to progress, here in Sicily. Now in Italy it is much more civilized, much more rest-

"How hard it must be to do right," said the Countess musingly. "Look at Paolo, for instance; he kills a vretched thief quite innocently, and yet the law holds him in prison. It s necessary of course, to be severe with robbers like Galli and his brother-in-law, who is an open out-law, and yet, I suppose if I were wife I should demand that Galli's blood to wash my blood. She is only

"You sympathize with her?" exclaimed Martel in astonishment.

"Deeply! I am not sorry the man vas killed, but a wife has rights. She will doubtless follow him." "Do you believe in the vendetta?"

Norvin asked curiously. 'Who does not? The law is full of tricks. There is a saying which runs, 'The gallows for the poor, jus-

tice for the fool!' "You are a Mafiosa," cried the scandalized aunt.

"It is one of Aliandro's sayings. He has lived a life! He often tells me

stories. "Aliandro is a terrible liar," Martel declared. "I fear his adventures are much like his rheumatism."

You do not exact a reckoning from our enemies in America?' queried Margherita.

"Oh, we do, but not with quite so much enthusiasm as you do, ". Blake answered. "We aren't ordinarily obliged to kill people in order to protect our property, and wives don't go about threatening vengeance when their husbands meet with accidents. The police take care of such things.

"A fine country! It must be so peaceful for old folks," ejaculated the aunt.

"We have some outlaws, to be sure like your notorious Belisario Cardi-"Cardi is but a name," said the girl "He does not exist."

Intercepting a warning glance from Martel, Blake said no more, and the talk drifted to more agreeable subiects.

But the Count, being possessed of a nervous temperament which called for constant motion, could not long remain inactive, and now, having poured his extravagant devotion into the ears of his inamorata, he rose saying:

"I must go to the village. The baker, the confectioner, the butcher all have many things to prepare for the festa, and I must order the fire works from Messina. Norvin will remain here while Ricardo and I complete the arrangements. I tell you it will be a celebration to awaken the countryside. For an hour then He touched his lips to Maraddio!" gherita's fingers and, bowing to her aunt, ran down the steps.

"Some gad-fly stings him," said the Donna Teresa fondly. "He is like a child; he cannot remain seated. He comes, he goes, he is like the wind. There is no holding him.'

"So there's to be a festa?" Blake

observed with interest. "Oh, indeed! it will be a great event. It was Martel's idea." Marevent. gherita arose and the young mar "See, out here upon followed. terrace there will be dancing. You have never seen a Sicilian merry making? You have never seen the tarantella! Then ou will be interested. On the night before the ceremony the people will come from the

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whole countryside. There will be music, games, fireworks. Oh, it will e a celebrazione. My cousins from Messina will be here, the bishop, many fine people. I-I am more ex cited than Martel. I can scarcely wait." The girl's face mirrored her emotion and her eyes were as deep as the sea. She seemed for the moment very far away, uplifted in contemplation of the great change so soon to occur in her life, and Norvin began to suspect her of a tremendous depth of feeling. Unknown even to herself she was smouldering; unawakened fires were stirred by the onsciousness of coming wifehood. Out here in the sun she was more tawny than ever, and recalling the threat against her lover, the young man fell to wondering how she would take misfortune if it ever came. Feelng his eyes upon her, she met his gaze frankly with a smile:

What is it? You have something He recovered himself with an ef-

"No! Only you are so different o what I expected.' "And you are also," she laughed. You are much more agreeable; I ike you immensely, and I want you

o tell me all about yourself."

That was a wonderful afternoon or Blake. The Sicilian girl took him nto her confidence without the slightest restaint. There was no perod of getting acquainted; it was as if they had known each other for a lifetime. He never ceased marvellng at her beauty, and his ears grew nore and more eager for her voice. Martel made no secret of his delight at their instantaneous liking for each other, and the dinner that evening was the gayest that had brightened Terranova for years.

Inasmuch as the ride to San Sebastiano was long, the young men were forced to leave early, but they vere scarcely out of hearing before Martel drew his horse in beside Norvin and, laying a hand upon his friend's arm, inquired, breathlessly: "Well? Come, come, brother of

mine! You know I peris hof eagerness. What have you to say The truth between man and man."?

Blake answered him with an odd nesitation:

"You must know yithout asking There's nothing to say—except that she—she is like a golden flame. She sets one afire. She is different, won-derful. I-I-"

"Exactly!" Savigno laughed with eenest contentment. "There is no other.'

When Blake retired that night it was not to sleep at once, for he was



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troubled by a growing fear of him-self that would not be lightly put

completion, and the consciousness of a coming celebration had penetrated the countryside. Among all who looked forward to the event, perhaps the one who watched the hours fly with the greatest degree of suspense was the American. He had half fac-ed the truth on that night after his first meeting with the girl, and the succeeding days enforced the con-viction he would have been glad to escape. He could no longer doubt that he was in love and madly infatuated with his best friends fiancee, and the knowledge came like some crushing misfortune. It could scarcey be called love at first sight, for he felt that he had always known and loved the girl. He had never believed in these sudden obsessions and more than one had been amused at Martel's ability to fall violently in love at a moment's notice, and to fall as quickly out again, but in spite of coolest reasoning and sternest self-reproach he found the spell too strong for him. Every decent instinct commanded him to uproot this infatuation; every impetuous impulse burst into sudden flame and consumed his better sense, his judgment, and his loyalty, leaving him shaken and doubtful. Although this was his first serious soul conflict possessed more than average selftcontrol, and he managed to conceal his feelings so well that Martel who was the embodiment of loyalty and generosity, never for a moment sus pected the truth. As for the girl, she was too full of her own happin ess to see anything amiss. She took her lover's comrade into her heart with that odd unrestraint which characterized her, and, recognizing the bond which united the two young men, she strove to widen it sufficiently to include herself. It spoke well for her that she felt no jealousy of that love which a man bears for his life's best friend, but rather strove to encourage it. Her intense desire to be a part of her lover and share all his affections led her to strive earnestly for a third place in the union, with the result that Blake saw more of her than did Savigno She deliberately set herself at the task of winning the American, a task already more than accomplished. had she but known it, and although for some women such a course would have been neither easy nor safe, with her a misconception of motive was impossible.

She had an ardent, almost reckless manner of attacking problems; she was as intense and yet as changeful as a flame. Blake watched her varyng moods with the same fascination with which one regards a wind-blown blaze, recognizing, even in her moments of repression, that she was ready to burst forth anew at the lightest breath. She was the sort of voman to dominate men, to inspire hem with tremendous enthusiasm for good or for evil as they chanced to lean toward the one or the other. While she seemed wholly admirable, she exercised a damnable effect upon Norvin. He was tortured by a thousand devils, he was possessed by dreams and fancies hitherto strange unrecognized. The nervous strain began to tell upon him; he slept ittle, he grew weary of the strugg things became unreal and distorted. He longed to end it all by flying from Sicily, and had there been more time he would have arranged for a ummons to America. His mother had not been well for a long time, and he was tempted to use this fact as an excuse for immediate depar but the thought that Martel needed him acted as an effective restraint. The vague menace of La Mafia still hung over the Count and was not lessened by the receipt of second threatening letter a few days after Blake's arrival.

Cardi wrote again, demanding instant compliance with the terms con-Savigno was directed to send Ricardo Ferara at a given hour to a certain crossroads above San Sebastiano with ten thousand lire. In that case candles would be burned and masses said for the soul of the murdered Galli, so the writer promised. The letter put no penalty upon a failure to comply with these demands, beyond a vague prediction of evil. It was short and business like and very much to the point. As this was the first document of

the kind Nirvin had ever seen, he was greatly interested in it.

"Don't you think it may be the work of Narcone?" he inquired. "I understand he is a brother-in-law of

"Narcone would scarcely undertake so bold a piece of blackmail," the Count declared. "I knew him slightly before he gave himself to the campagna. He was a butcher, he was brutal and domineering, but he was a coward."

"It is not from Narcone," Ricardo pronounced positively-they had called in the overseer for the discussion "he is grossolano. He can neither read nor write. This letter is well spelled and well written.'

"Then you think it is really from Cardi?'

Ricardo shrugged his square shoulders. "Who knows? Some say there is no such person, others declare he went to America years ago."

CHAPTER IV .The Feast at Terranova. During the next few days Norvin Blake saw much of the Countess Margherita, for every afternoon he and Martel rode to Terranova. The preparations for the wedding neared

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"What is your belief?" "I know a man who has seen him."
"Who?"

"Aliandro." "Bah! Aliandro is such a liar!"

exclaimed Savigno. "However, that may be, he has seen things in his time. He says that Cardi is not what people suppose him to be-a brigand-except when it suits his desires. comes and goes and the Carabinieri can never trace him. That is why he s at home in all parts of Sicily; that s why he uses men like Narcone

when he chooses. "It would please me to capture the wretch," said Martel. "Let's try it," Norvin suggested,

and accordingly a trap was laid. Four carbineers were sent to the ppointed place, ahead of time, with lirections to conceal themselves, and Ferara carried out his part of the rogramme. But no one came to meet im, he encountered no one coming or going to the crossroads, and returned However, at greatly disgusted. uggestion Colonel Neri stationed the four soldier policemen at the castello to prevent any demonstration to profit by any development which might occur.

The young men did not permit this diversion to interrupt their daily trips to Terranova, although as a matter of precaution they added Ipolito to their party. He was delighted at the change of duty because as Norvin discovered, it brought him to the side of Lucrezia Ferara. Thus it happened that Martel and reason o regret the choice of his bodyguard, for on the very first visit Ippolito began to strut and swagger before the girl and allowed the secret to him whereupon it was carried o the Countess. She appealed to Martel to leave

San Sebastiano for the time being, to postpone the wedding or at least to go to Messina for it; but of course he refused and tried to laugh down her misgivings, and of course she appealed privately to Blake for as-

"You must use your influence to change his mind," she said earnesty. "He declares he will not be overawed by these ruffians He says that to pay them the least attention would be to encourage them to another attempt when we return, but-he does not know the Mafia as I know it. You

will do this for me?"
"Of course, if you wish it, although I agree with Martel, and I'm sure he won't listen to me. He can't play the coward. The wedding is only two days off now. Why, tomorrow is the gala-day! How could he notify the whole district, when all his prepar-ations have been completed? What excuse could he give without cor fessing his fear and making himself liable to a later and stronger attack?"

'The country people need not know Let them come anything about it. and make merry. He can leave now to-night. We will join him at Mes-Norvin shook his head, "I'll do

what I can since you wish it, but I'm sure he won't consent to any change of plan. I'm sure also, that you are needlessly troubled." she acknowledged,

"Perhaps," doubtfully. "And yet Martel's father

"Yes, yes. But conditions are not what they were fifteen years ago. This is merely a blackmailing scheme, and if he ignores it he'll probably never hear of it again. On the other hand, if he allows it to drive him away, it will be repeated upon his return.'

She searched his face with her eyes and his wits reeled at her earnest gaze. He was conscious of a single wild desire that such anxiety might be for him. How gladly he would yield to her wishes-how gladly he would yield to any wish of hers! He was a foreigner, he hated this island and its people, for the most part, and yet if he stood in Martel's place he would willingly change his life to correspond with hers. He would become Sicilian in body and soul. She had the power to dissolve his habits, his likes and dislikes, and reconstruct him through and through.
"I hope you are right," she said at

last. "And yet—it is said that no one escapes the Mafia." "This isn't the Mafia. It is the

(Continued on page nine)

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