

"The Net"

— BY —
Rex Beach

Author of

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

CHAPTER I. The Train From Palermo

The train from Palermo was late. Already long shadowy fingers were reaching down the valleys and across which the railroad track meandered. Far to the left, out of an opalescent sea, rose the fairy-like lipari Islands, and in the farthest distance Stromboli lifted its smoking cone above the horizon. On the landward side of the train, as it reeled and squealed along its tortuous course, were gray and gold Sicilian villages perched among fields of artichoke and sun-high against the hills or drowsing much and prickly pear.

To one familiar with modern Sicilian railway trains the journey eastward from Palermo promises no considerable discomfort, but twenty-five years ago it was not to be lightly undertaken—not to be undertaken at all, in fact, without an unusual equipment of patience and resignation entirely lacking in the average Anglo-Saxon. It was not surprising therefore, that Norvin Blake, as the hours dragged along, should remark less and less upon the beauties of the island and more and more upon the medieval condition of the rickety railroad coach in which he was shaken and buffeted about. He shifted himself to an easier position upon the seat and lighted a cheroot, for although this was his first glimpse of Sicily, he had watched the same villages come and go all through a long, hot afternoon, had seen the same groves of orange and lemon and dust-green olive trees, the same fields of Barbary figs, the same rose-grown garden spots, until he was heartily tired of them all. He felt at liberty to smoke for the only other occupant of the compartment was a young priest in flowing mantle and silk beaver hat.

Finding that Blake spoke Italian well for a foreigner, the priest had shown an earnest desire for closer acquaintance and now plied him eagerly with questions, hanging upon his answers with a child-like intensity of gaze which at first had been amusing.

"And so the Signore has travelled all the way from Paris to attend the wedding at Terranova. Veramente! That is a great journey. Many wonderful adventures befell you, perhaps, Eh? The priest's little eyes gleamed from his full cheeks and he edged forward until his knees crowded Blake's. It was evident that he anticipated a thrilling tale and did not intend to be disappointed.

"It was very tiresome, that's all, and the beggars at Naples nearly tore me asunder."

"Incredible! You will tell me about it?"

"There's nothing to tell. These European trains cannot compare with ours."

Evidently discouraged at his lack

of response, the questioner tried a new line of approach.

"The Signore is perhaps related to our young Conte?" he suggested. "And that can scarcely be, for you are Inglese—"

"Americano!"

"Indeed?"

"Martel and I are close friends, however. We met in Paris. We are almost like brothers."

"Truly! I have heard he spends much time studying to be a great painter. It is very strange, but many of our rich people leave Sicily to reside elsewhere. As for me I cannot understand it."

"Martel left when his father was killed. He says this country is behind the times and he prefers to be out in the world where there is life and where things progress."

But the priest showed by a blank stare that he did not begin to grasp the meaning of the statement. He shook his head. "He was always a wild lad. Now as to the Signorina Ginini, who is to be his beautiful Contessa, she loves Sicily. She has spent most of her life here among us."

With a flash of interest Blake inquired:

"What is she like? Martel has spoken of her a great many times, but one can't place much dependence on a lover's description."

"Bellissima!" the priest sighed, and rolled his eyes eloquently. "You have never seen anything like her, I assure you. She is altogether too beautiful. If I had my way all the beautiful women would be placed in a convent where no man could see them. Then there would be no fighting and no flirting, and the plain women could secure husbands. Beautiful women are dangerous. She is rich, too."

"Of course! That's what Martel says and that is exactly the way he says it. But describe her."

"Oh, I have never seen her! I merely know that she is very rich and very beautiful." He went off into a number of rapturous "issimas!" "Now as for the Conte, I know him like a book. I know his every thought."

"But Martel has been abroad for ten years and he has only returned within a month."

"To be sure, but I come from the village this side of San Sebastiano and my second cousin, Riccardo is his uncle d'affaire—his overseer. It is a very great position of trust which Riccardo occupies, for I must tell you that he attends to the leasing of the entire estate during the Conte's absence in France, or wherever it is he draws those marvellous pictures. Riccardo collects the rent."

With true Sicilian naivete the priest added, "He is growing rich! Beato lui. He for one will not go to your golden America. It is true Signore, that in America any one who wishes may be rich?"

"Quite true," smiled the young man. "Even our Leggars are rich."

The priest wagged his head knowingly. "My mother's cousin, Alfio Amato, he is an American. You know him?"

"I'm afraid not."

"But surely—he has been in America these five years. A tall dark fellow with fine teeth. Think! He is such a liar any one would remember him. Ebbene! He wrote that there were poor people in America as here, but we knew him too well to believe him."

"Oh, indeed! It will unite two old families. You know the Savignis are rich also. Even before the children were left as orphans it was settled they should be married. What a great fortune that will make for Riccardo to oversee! Then perhaps, he will be more generous to his own people. He is a hard man in money matters, and a man of action also; he does not allow flies to sit upon his nose. He sent his own daughter Lucrezia to Terranova when the Contessa was still a child, and what is the result? Lucrezia is no longer a servant. Indeed no, she is more like a sister to the Signorina. At the marriage no doubt she will receive a fine present, and Riccardo as well. He is as silent as Masfioso, but he thinks."

Young Blake stretched his tired muscles, yawning.

"I'm sorry Martel couldn't marry in France; this has been a tedious trip."

"It was the Contessa's wish then to be wed in Sicily?"

"I believe she insisted. And Martel agreed that it was the proper thing to do, since they are both Sicilians. He was determined also that I should be present to share his joy, and so here I am. Between you and me I envy him his lot so much that it almost spoils for me the pleasure of this unique journey."

"You are an original!" murmured the priest, admiringly, but it was evident that his thirst for knowledge of the outside world was not to be so easily quenched, for he began to question his travelling companion closely regarding America, Paris, the journey thence, the ship which bore him to Palermo, and a dozen other subjects upon which his active mind preyed. He was full of the gossip of the countryside, moreover, and Norvin learned much of interest about Sicily, and the disposition of her people. One phenomenon to which the good man referred with the extremest wonder was Blake's intimacy with a Sicilian nobleman. How an American Signore had become such a close friend of the illustrious Count, who was almost a stranger, even to his own people, seemed very puzzling indeed, until Norvin explained that they had been together almost constantly during the past three years.

"We met quite by chance, but we quickly became friends—what in my country we call chums—and we have been inseparable ever since."

"And you then are also a great artist?"

Blake laughed at the indirect compliment to his friend. "I am not an artist at all. I have been exiled to Europe for three years, upon my mother's orders. She has her own ideas regarding a man's education, and wishes me to acquire a continental polish. My ability to tell you all this shows that I have at least made progress with the languages, although I have doubts about the practical value of anything else I have learned. Martel has taught me Italian; I have taught him English."

This opened a new field of inquiry for the priest who was making the most of it when the train drew up into a station and was stormed by a horde of chattering country folk. The platform swarmed with vividly dressed women, most of whom carried bundles wrapped up in variegated handkerchiefs, and all of whom were tremendously excited at the prospect of travel. Lean-visaged, swarthy men peered forth from the folds of shawls or from beneath shapeless caps of many colors; a pair of carabinieri idled past, a soldier in jaunty feathered hat posed before the contadini. Dogs, donkeys, fowls, added their clamour to the high-pitched voices.

Twilight had settled and lights were kindling in the village, while the heights above were growing black against a rose-pink and mother-of-pearl sky. The air was cool and fragrant with the odour of growing things, while the open sea glowed with a subdued pulsating fire.

The capto stazione rushed madly back and forth striving by voice and gesture to hasten the movements of his passengers.

"Partenza! Pronto!" he cried, then blew furiously upon his bugle.

After a series of shudders and convulsions the train began to hiss and clank and finally crept on into the twilight, while the priest sat knee to knee with his companion and resumed his endless questioning.

It was considerably after dark when Norvin Blake alighted at San Sebastiano to be greeted effusively by a young man of about his own age, who came charging through the gloom and embraced him with a great hug.

"So! At last you come!" Savigno cried. "I have been here these last three hours eating my heart out, and every time I enquired of that head of cabbage in yonder he said, Paziienza! The world was not made in a day!"

"But when! When! I kept repeating, and he could only assure me that your train was approaching with the speed of the wind. The saints in heaven—even the superintendent of the railway himself—could not tell the exact hour of its arrival, which, it seems, is never twice the same. One gitted in sovery and second sight could not predict so uncertain a happening, he assured me. And now, yourself! You are well?"

"Never better. And you? But there is no need to ask. You look disgustingly contented. One would think you were already married."

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We use both, and sometimes we understand each other. My three years are up now, and once I have seen my good friend safely married I shall return to America and begin the serious business of life.

"You are then in business? My mother's cousin, Alfio Amato, is likewise a business man. He deals in fruit. Beware of him, for he would sell you rotten oranges and swear by the saints that they were excellent."

"Like Martel, I have land which I lease. I am, or I will be a cotton-planter."

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Martel Savigno showed a row of even white teeth beneath his military moustache and clapped his friend affectionately on the back.

And now, car Norvin, for the last leg of your journey. Will you ride in the car or on horseback? It is not far, but the roads are steep."

"It is good to be among my own people. I find, after all, that I am a Sicilian. But let me tell you, that train is not always late. Once, seven years ago it arrived upon the moment. There were no passengers at the station to meet it, however, so it was forced to wait, and now, in order to keep our good-will, it always arrives thus."

The Count was a well set-up youth of an alert and active type, tall, dark and vivacious, with a skin as smooth as that of a girl. He had an impulsive, energetic nature that seldom left him in repose, and hence the contrast between the two men was marked, for Blake was of a more serious cast of features and possessed a decidedly Anglo-Saxon reserve. He was much the heavier in build, also, which detracted from his height and robbed him of that elegance with disting-

uished the young Sicilian. Yet the two made a fine looking pair, as they stood face to face in the yellow glare of the station lights.

"What the deuce made me agree to this trip, I don't know," the American declared. "It was vile. I've been car-sick, seasick, homesick—"

"And all for poor lovesick Martel!" The Count laughed. "Ah, but if you knew how glad I am to see you!"

"Really? Then that squares it." Blake spoke with that indefinable undernote which creeps into men's voices when friend meets friend. "I've been lost without you, too I was quite ashamed of myself."

The Count turned to a middle-aged man who had remained in the shadows, saying:

"This is Riccardo Ferrara, my good right hand, of whom you have heard me speak." The overseer raised his hat and Blake took his hand, catching a glimpse of a grizzled face and Riccardo. Michele! Ippolito! the a stiff mop of iron-gray hair. "You will see to Signore Blake's baggage, Count called. "The carreta quickly!

(to be continued)

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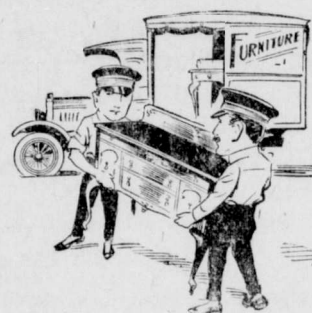
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