

MAUBIKECK,

THE LION-TAMER.

By Seward W. Hopkins.

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CHAPTER XV.

My reflections, as the long hours dragged themselves along toward morning, were anything but refreshing.

The dominant thought, of course, was that I had got myself into a bad scrape and would probably lose my life. I saw no way to prevent the successful execution of any plan for my punishment or extinction which the *prefetto* saw fit to put into operation. The law was against me. In fact, had there been any opportunity to prove my innocence of the charge of murder, the power of the *prefetto* was so great that my punishment for entering his house to carry away Barlotti might be as severe as he chose to make it.

For one moment the thought did come to me: 'There is the United States Minister.' I dismissed this idea as holding out no hope. To begin, I would have great difficulty in proving to our representative that my act was justifiable. And my knowledge of the policy of our State Department led me to believe that no matter how innocent I was or how much of an injustice my punishment might be, I could expect no succor from my government. And even had I felt sure of assistance from that quarter, I had no means of communicating with our representative. In fact, I was entirely cut off from all communication with the world. My friends would probably never know what became of me. My only hope was Mutterelli. And where, through all this, was Mutterelli?

Calling to my assistance all the nerve I possessed, I resolved to put on as good a face in the matter as possible, and not allow the *prefetto* or his guards to see any signs of weakness in my demeanour. The room in which I was held was lighted by a large lamp which hung from the ceiling. I drew a chair under the lamp, and with the same monochromatic glow which would have characterized me had I been in my favourite corner at the Lotus Club with the major and Dilkins around me instead of the black-looking Sardinians, I pulled from my pocket and began to read the paper I had taken from the table in Pacho Maligni's room.

This act of mine was not merely bravado. I resolved to learn the contents of that manuscript, if I died the next day. I did not know but it would be taken away from me, and even though I escaped from Cagliari, I would never know the secret of the red box.

As I opened the paper to read, I narrowly watched the guards to see if the act had any significance in their eyes. Certainly it had none, for they smoked cigarettes and chatted to each other, ignoring my performance, and carrying their zeal in the *prefetto's* service only to the point of preventing my escape.

I read the paper over quickly, and then again slowly, digesting every word of the remarkable production. The writing was poor and cramped. The construction was odd and faulty, as if the work was beyond the meagre powers of the writer. The spelling was bad, yet I devoured it with no thought of criticism. It read as follows:

'New York City, in the Stat New York, in the United States of America, May 16, 18—.

'To the person who, when I am dead, shall obtain this paper, I salute. It is that I am at every day in the great danger of being killed by an accident in my profession that I leave in this form the story of Nita Barlotti, that perhaps in some long day to become she may be restored to those where she belong and who has lost her. And it is that I hope the person who reads this letter first is an honest person that I now betray this secret that is upon my heart, but which I am not powerful to solve nor to do just to the dear signorina, who in like my own daughter to me. And I, who am known to the world as Barlotti, the Trapeze King, pray to that person who reads these words to do what he can and what I cannot to the good end that Nita Barlotti may know who she really is, and may come into her own if she is, as I believe, the daughter of a rich person.'

It is that I am most in America, and shall perhaps die among the English-speaking people, that I use not my own language to write, and it is that which makes my words not to be the words of the educated man.

'It will be a surprise to the person who find this, to know that my name it is not Barlotti, but Sigmotta. Yes, I am Antonio Sigmotta, and Barlotti is the name I have taken in the circus to please my brother, who was very rich and a physician in New York.'

'When I came this country I was poor—very poor. I went to my brother, and he was angry to me in word, but he did some kindness to me that he let me live in his house till I had money to keep myself. I make contract with Maligni to go in the circus as trapeze actor, and my brother make me change my name, so not to disgrace him.'

'While I lived with my brother I was sad that he was a bad man, and swore oaths and drank much liquor, and was drunk much of the time. And bad men came to see him.'

'My brother had many times told me he was a professor to one big college where medicine is taught. This I do not know.'

'One day I went into my brother's private room for something. It was a workshop—he call laboratoria or some like that. It was at the night, and was very dark. My brother was in his bedroom. I did not know what he was doing, and he did not know I was in the house, for I had been out and just came in.'

'I lighted the gas in the laboratoria, and found what I was looking for—some medicine he gave me when I had the aching of the head.'

'As I was about to turn back the gas to go out, I saw a bundle on the floor. It seemed to me that it move. Then I stood still, and I hear a lively cry like a child, I rush to the door. I listen for my brother, but he not to be heard. I open the bundle. It was a sack, with strings in the end. It had in it a little child— a girl. I drew it out. The child breath and moan, but do not seem to know, and then I know my brother had given it a drug.'

'Then I hurry, trembling much, and I took some cloths and other things and I make a rag baby just the size of the child I took from the sack. I put the rag baby in the sack and made it tight like it was before I opened it. Then I quick carry the live child to my room and hide it in my bed. Then I watch. Pretty soon my brother come and go to the laboratoria. I keep quiet so he do not hear me, and follow him. He take the sack and my rag baby and steal from his own house like he was a thief, and I knew he was worse. Still, I follow him. I know that no one would touch the child, because I had lock the door of my room and had the key in my pocket, and it was so heavy with the drug that it would sleep yet longer.'

'My brother went into a dark street and went to the docks on the East River. I saw him take a stone and tie a cord to it and around the sack. Then he throw all into the water. When he saw it sink he turn round and sneak home. In twenty minutes I come home like I had not been there before, and my brother was sitting in the library reading and smoking and drinking wine, like he was not a murderer. I spoke to my brother, but did not drink wine with him, and then I went to my room.'

'I had in New York, near my brother's house, a sweetheart. I met her at a concert hall, and I often went to see her at her house. She was a great singer, and I love her, so I want to marry her. She was a good girl, and her name was Nita.'

'Late in the night I took the child, and when my brother was asleep I stole from his house and carried the child to Nita. I told her all about my brother, and she promised not to say one word, for I knew my brother would kill me if he knew. I was then intend to find out who the child was, and if she had parents who love her, give her back. But I must go with Maligni in the circus, and I leave the little girl with Nita till I come home. When I come home my brother Charles was gone, and I never saw him again. Nita was married to me and she called the little girl Nita after herself. For a few years my wife Nita, and little Nita, travel with me in the circus, but my wife Nita take sick and die. Then I had little Nita put in a big school in Albany, and she is there now.'

'I had a pin and a locket and chain with little Nita wore, and which I had kept. They will be in the box with this letter. On the pin is the name Alice. The locket I had a picture of a beautiful lady. I took this picture out and put a little slip of paper under it with the date on it when I found the child.'

'This is all I know. I love little Nita like she was my own. My brother's name is Charles Sigmotta, but I do not know where he is. Little Nita is at Madame De Long's school in Albany, in the Stat of New York.'

'I swear by all the holy saints that what I have written is true.'

'ANTONIO SIGMOTTA.'

Here, indeed, was a valuable document. My exultation was so great that I seemed to have Ralph Graviencourt completely routed, and Edith Broughton's sweet face seemed to smile encouragingly at me from way across the sea. But after a few minutes of supreme gratification, the thought

flashed over me that the statement of Antonio Sigmotta, otherwise known as Barlotti, did not in any way connect Ralph Graviencourt with the case. Of course, the photograph, the pin with the name Alice engraved upon it and Nita Barlotti's striking resemblance to the wife of Charles Graviencourt, were to my mind conclusive evidence, but would the evidence hold in law? I knew it would not.

I took the locket from my pocket, removed the picture and found a slip of white paper bearing a date. I examined this, and my heart throbbed with excitement when I saw that the date of Doctor Sigmotta's assumed murder of Nita Barlotti was the same as that inscribed upon the tombstone in Trinity Cemetery, New York, as the date of little Alice Graviencourt's death. I carefully replaced the paper and the picture, and with wild dreams of what might occur if I ever escaped from the clutches of the *prefetto*, I passed the remainder of the night half sleeping on a broad, low couch that stood in one corner of the guard room.

CHAPTER XVI.

I HAD, I suppose, what must from courtesy be called a trial. If a tribunal where the law is all on the side of the strong, and where the prisoner does not understand one-half what is being said about him, much less have anything to say for himself, and where the judge is the plaintiff, can be said to give a man a trial, then I had a trial.

In the morning I was served with a substantial breakfast, and soon after I had disposed of it I was conducted before the *prefetto*. The elder Maligni looked at me with a venomous glance, and I saw in the faces of the crowd of men around him not one glance of friendliness. They were Sardinians, all of them, some being in the uniform of the guard, some being evidently men of rank, and others dressed in the garb of priests and friars from the monastery. And every one looked upon me with the same malignant expression as did the brother of the man I was supposed to have killed.

Among the spectators was a racially-looking fellow who was called by the *prefetto* 'Pordino,' and as he seemed to have the friendship of the powerful Maligni, I at once identified him as the Count di Pordino, the uncle of Henry Thorsane, spoken of by Mutterelli.

So far as my being a force or factor in my own behalf was concerned, I might as well have been absent.

First one of the priests said something. Of course, I did not understand all that he was telling the *prefetto*, but I understood enough to know that he was testifying that he had seen me near the villa the day before, and that my action was such as to indicate evil designs. Then a man who looked as he might be a house-servant jabbered something which I did not understand at all. My trial was now well under way.

The captain of the guard testified, and told how I had been captured while fleeing from the place, how I attempted to shoot the guard, and how I was making off with Nita Barlotti, the facts as known making it perfectly plain to him that my object in murdering Maligni was to abduct his bride.

Nita was not brought into the room during the trial, and did not seem to be an important factor. There was not a friendly voice raised in my behalf. I made an attempt to speak, but was ordered to be quiet.

When the testimony was all in, the *prefetto* turned to me, and said:

'Young man, I have listened to the evidence against you, and I find that you are guilty of the murder of my brother. From to-day, you are the same as dead. The sentence which I shall impose upon you is that you be put in the Cagliari prison and work for the State during the remainder of your life. That is all I have to say to you.'

'But,' I cried, springing to my feet, 'I am not guilty. I swear to you, *prefetto*, that I do not know who killed your brother! I had no cause to hate him or to wish him dead! But others had! An attempt at his life was made in New York. I saw it, but I had nothing to do with it. Your brother had enemies who have tracked him here.'

'Enough. You were seen yesterday, in company with another, examining my villa and grounds. At night my brother is murdered, and you are found on my pro-

perty, carrying off my brother's promised wife. It is enough.'

Then, turning to the guard, he uttered a command, and I was conducted from this hall of justice to my prison.

The prison of Cagliari is what is called 'Torre dell' Elefante,' a veritable fortress, standing on the high ground of the city, overlooking, on the north, the waters of the bay, and to the northward the rising mountains and valleys beyond.

As I entered the great iron gates of the prison yard, and heard them clang behind me, I felt the deepest despair, and admitted to myself that there was little hope of regaining my liberty.

I was at once given into the hands of the keeper of the prison, and was put, through the regular routine of measuring, photographing and otherwise identifying, common in European prisons. My hair was shaved close, and my moustache as well. My clothes were taken from me, and I was clad in the bi-coloured prison suit with which Sardinian clothes its prisoners.

These suits are made of stuff very similar to that in use for the same purpose in the United States, but the colours, instead of running in stripes, are divided in the middle. One half, measuring from a line drawn from the nose downward is dark, and the other light. When I had been thus clothed, I had one arm, leg, and the right side of my body black, and the left arm, leg, and half of my body a dirty grey.

My watch, the gold locket and pin that I had taken from Maligni was taken from me, but the letter of Antonio Sigmotta was returned to me with a shrug of the keeper's shoulder, as if to indicate that if the possession of a piece of paper would make me any happier, I might have it for all he cared to the contrary.

This done, I was conducted with scant ceremony to a dungeon cell, and was thrust into it, my brutal keeper taking the unnecessary trouble to give me a kick before he locked me in.

If my reflections had heretofore been gloomy, they were now doubly so. I could but feel the most horrible forebodings for the future. Yet, I declared to myself, I would never give up altogether.

My cell was perhaps twenty feet square, high up in the tower, and overlooked the north.

The floor was of stone, and the walls of some kind of cement. The furniture consisted of an iron bedstead, an old chair, and a small table. The light came through a small grated window which was above my head, and in the corner of the cell there was a damp, clammy darkness that I could feel as well as see.

Somewhat I had acquired a bulldog's silliness that was not at all part of my nature. I felt that had those things happened to me before I had met the unfortunate Maubikeck, I would have now lost all hope and fortitude, and would have thrown myself upon the bed of my cell in an agony of despair, and perhaps would have lost my reason through it all.

But I had learned something from the dead, and I resolved that, no matter what came, or what I might feel, I would exhibit no emotion, no fear, no regret, to the sneering eyes of my relentless persecutors.

For a time after I reached my cell, I was greatly worked up, the excitement of the day and of the previous night having a try effect on my nerves. But as the hours wore on, the fact that I had slept little began to tell on me, and I grew drowsy. Sitting on my hard chair, I gave myself up to my bitter reflections, and finally my head dropped, and, overcome by the drowsiness which was increased by the silence of my cell, I fell asleep, and my waking meditations became merged in a dream in which I renewed acquaintance with Major Simmons and Dilkins, and saw their faces, and the face of Edith Broughton, and the faces of other friends peering at me, some in pity, some in alarm, some with love. And most strongly outlined among them all was the calm, stern face of my dead hero, Maubikeck. There was an inspiration in that face as, half sleeping, I saw it looking down at me. It bade me rouse myself. It shone like a beacon before me, leading me to a resolution that I would never have reached but for this fantastic appearance. It brought to my mind the heroism of Maubikeck, by whose death I was given life. The manliness of his nature seemed imparted to mine. I recollected that Nita Barlotti, the girl whom I had sworn to save, was still in the hands of men whose purposes were not always good. My own love for Edith

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