



SICILIAN MYSTERY

by Arthur Catherall



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1. A Meeting in Milazzo

STROMBOLI—that volcanic island known to seamen of old as the Lighthouse of the Mediterranean—disturbed the quiet with a low rumble. A few moments later the volcano threw up a spout of red-hot ash and glowing stones. This lit up the crater for perhaps twenty seconds, then all was quiet, and once again the three-thousand-foot peak was wrapped in the darkness of an early February morning.

At the boat landing on the island Bruno Bartolli, a thin, balding, middle-aged man in an ill-fitting suit, stared anxiously out to sea. The interisland boat, which had left Naples on the Italian mainland the previous evening, was due here at six. At a quarter to six Bartolli saw her lights, and at half past six he was aboard and on his way.

The boat took all day to make the rounds of the Aeolian Islands which lie some miles off the north coast of Sicily, so it was five in the afternoon when Bartolli stepped ashore at the vessel's last stop—the little Sicilian port of Milazzo.

After registering at a hotel, he sat at one of the small tables outside on the veranda, smoking and staring anxiously at each car which stopped in front of the hotel. At length he saw a tall, pink-faced man step out of a taxi and head in his direction. The man took a seat at Bartolli's table and they shook hands politely.

"Have you been waiting long, Bartolli?" the newcomer asked, lighting a cigar.

"Not very long, Signor Horrobin. Have you had a good trip?" Bartolli went on somewhat nervously, "The weather in the islands has been good for almost a week now—calm and warm—but I expect we shall get the winds soon enough."

Felix Horrobin nodded. He called the waiter and ordered a meal in Italian which had a slight British accent. The two men talked mostly about the weather until the waiter had served the main course. Then Horrobin opened the subject which had brought him by air from England and Bartolli by sea from Stromboli.

"I shall be coming to stay at your hotel in a few days," Horrobin said. "In the meantime I want you to go back and pass the word around that you have a request from a crazy Englishman for turtles.

Tell the fishermen that the turtles must be newly caught, and that the Englishman will pay 10,000 lire¹ for each one.”

“But, signor, the turtle season is practically finished,” Bartolli protested. “There may be the odd one swimming about, but none of the fishermen can afford to spend days in the hope of catching just one turtle. There must be some other way of doing what you plan.”

“By now, Bartolli, you should realize I never waste my time,” Horrobin said crisply. “I have come at this period of the year precisely so that none of the fishermen *will* catch turtles.” He poured more wine into Bartolli’s glass, then added with a grin, “You can’t see beyond the end of your nose, man. I want everyone to know I am looking for turtles. Then I want you to get hold of some fellow who is poor enough to be tempted to go after turtles at a day rate.”

“Day rate, signor?” Bartolli’s brows wrinkled in a frown. “I do not understand.”

“I sometimes wonder how I came to hire you,” Horrobin said, his smile fading. “By day rate I mean that I am prepared to pay the man a wage, a daily wage, plus the cost of his fuel simply to go out looking for turtles. If he should catch one, I’ll try and look pleased and pay him a bonus.”

“It is extremely unlikely that he would catch any,” Bartolli said. “Oh, he might get a stray one, but—”

Horrobin interrupted him impatiently. “I don’t care if he doesn’t catch a sprat. All I want is for the people of Stromboli to know that I am anxious to buy turtles, and crazy enough to pay someone to go and look for them.” As Bartolli still looked stupefied, Horrobin said quietly, “When I am ready, the man *will* catch turtles. I shall see to that. By then nobody will be too surprised, and the mad Englishman will be able to ship them home without any trouble.”

“And that is all I have to do?” Bartolli was still not satisfied.

“Not quite.” Leaning forward so there would be no possibility of anyone overhearing him, Horrobin went on. “I want you to make sure that the man who goes out will keep his mouth shut afterward. Is there someone among the Stromboli fishermen who is really desperate for money? A man who needs money badly will not gossip.”

¹There are 620 lire to a dollar

“They are all poor,” Bartolli said. “But they are also honest, and if . . . oh, perhaps there is one man—”

“There nearly always is.” Horrobin spoke triumphantly.

“But I would not like this man, Alonzo Solderi, to get into trouble,” Bartolli said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Solderi is a good man.”

“He won’t get into trouble,” Horrobin said. “All he has to do is keep his mouth shut. Why does he need the money?”

“His wife is very ill and is waiting to be operated on at the hospital here in Milazzo,” Bartolli said. “There are so many sick people and so few doctors. If you are in a hurry, you must pay a large amount in cash to have an operation done at once. But that would put Solderi in debt for the rest of his life.”

“Couldn’t be better,” Horrobin gloated. He brought out his wallet, peeled off ten bank notes, each valued at 10,000 lire, and handed them to Bartolli. “After the rest of your fishermen turn down the idea of hunting turtles, get hold of Solderi privately. Offer to lend him this money for his wife’s operation. He will probably jump at the chance of getting her into the hands of a good doctor. And once he has taken the money from you, he won’t dare talk.”

“Solderi is a nice man,” Bartolli said regretfully. “I don’t like to do it.”

“What you *like* to do doesn’t interest me,” Horrobin said quietly. “Just remember you will be in real trouble the moment you start disobeying orders.”

“I did not intend to disobey, signor,” Bartolli said hurriedly.

“Of course not,” said Horrobin, finishing off his glass of wine. “Get this Solderi lined up for the job as soon as possible after you return—I’ll be arriving on Stromboli a week from now.”

Bartolli started to rise from the table, but Horrobin motioned for him to sit down again. “Before we part, Bruno, you had better sign a receipt for the lire I gave you.” Bringing out his wallet, Horrobin unfolded a typed sheet, which he laid on the table, then held out a ball-point pen.

Bartolli studied the receipt for a moment. It was simply worded: “For special services in the employ of Signor Felix Horrobin, 100,000 lire.”

“Sign,” Horrobin said, a mocking smile on his face. “I know you’ll take at least 20,000 lire for yourself, but that doesn’t matter

to me. I'm getting quite a nice collection of these receipts, Bartolli. They go in a special file. If I should ever fall into the hands of the police, these receipts would show that at least one Sicilian received plenty of money from me."

Clapping a hand on Bartolli's shoulder, Horrobin smiled. "Don't worry," he said. "The police will never catch me. You're safe." Then he called the waiter and ordered two more drinks.

An hour later they parted—Felix Horrobin to take the boat across to the Italian mainland, Bartolli to spend an uneasy night in the Milazzo hotel.

Early the next morning Bartolli boarded the boat for Stromboli, and before the day was over he allowed the news to leak out that a crazy Englishman was eager to buy turtles. All he got from the half-dozen men on Stromboli who owned boats was skeptical grins. The turtle season was almost over, and even the promise of gasoline and 1,000 lire a day did not tempt them.

Finally Bartolli spoke to Alonzo Solderi, "Ah, Alonzo, how is your wife?" Then, snapping his fingers as if suddenly angry with himself, he said, "I knew there was something I meant to do when I was in Milazzo, but I could not think what it was. Seeing you has reminded me. I planned to go to the hospital to inquire about your wife. Has she had her operation? Did all go well?"

Alonzo Solderi shook his head sadly. "I wish I could say that it did, Signor Bartolli. But you know how it is. A letter came only yesterday by the morning boat. I took it to the priest to read. My poor wife must wait her turn. She could be operated on at once—if I could pay a surgeon's fees. Can I pull down the moon from the sky? Fifty thousand lire, signor—for an operation." Solderi was so overcome with emotion that he got up and hurriedly left the little group of villagers.

His neighbors shook their heads. Poor Alonzo! His wife would have to return to Stromboli until she was further up the list of those waiting for the surgeon. By then it might be too late.

Bartolli nodded his sympathy, then strolled away. A quarter of an hour later he called on Alonzo Solderi at his house.

"I have been thinking about your wife, Alonzo," he said, taking the chair Solderi offered him. "I know people must wait their turn for an operation, but your wife—is it so serious for her?"

Alonzo could only nod.