









Dedication

**TO THE MIDDY, THE LADDIE, THE MATE AND THE MEN  
THE SKIPPER OF THE OLD *LEONE* DEDICATES THIS STORY**



## CHAPTER I.

Lay your course south-east half east from the Campanella. If the weather is what it should be in late summer you will have a fresh breeze on the starboard quarter from ten in the morning till four or five o'clock in the afternoon. Sail straight across the wide gulf of Salerno, and when you are over give the Licosa Point a wide berth, for the water is shallow and there are reefs along shore. Moreover there is no light on Licosa Point, and many a good ship has gone to pieces there in dark winter nights when the surf is rolling in. If the wind holds you may run on to Palinuro in a long day before the evening calm comes on, and the water turns oily and full of pink and green and violet streaks, and the sun settles down in the north-west. Then the big sails will hang like curtains from the long slanting yards, the slack sheets will dip down to the water, the rudder will knock softly against the stern-post as the gentle swell subsides. Then all is of a golden orange colour, then red as wine, then purple as grapes, then violet, then grey, then altogether shadowy as the stars come out—unless it chances that the moon is not yet full, and edges everything with silver on your left hand while the sunset dyes fade slowly to darkness upon your right.

Then the men forward will bestir themselves and presently a red glow rises and flickers and paints what it touches, with its own colours. The dry wood crackles and flares on the brick and mortar hearth, and the great kettle is put on. Presently the water boils—in go the long bundles of fine-drawn paste, and everybody collects forward to watch the important operation. Stir it quickly at first. Let it boil till a bit of it is tender under the teeth. In with the coarse salt, and stir again. Up with kettle. Chill it with a quart of cold water from the keg. A hand with the colander and one with the wooden spoon while the milky boiling water is drained off. Garlic and oil, or tomato preserve? Whichever it is, be quick about it. And so to supper, with huge hard biscuit and stony cheese, and the full wine jug

passed from mouth to mouth. To every man a fork and to every man his place within arm's length of the great basin—mottled green and white within, red brown and unglazed on the outside. But the man at the helm has an earthen plate, and the jug is passed aft to him from time to time.

Not that he has much to do as he lies there on his six-foot deck that narrows away so sharply to the stern. He has taken a hitch round the heavy tiller with the slack of the main sheet to keep it off the side of his head while he eats. There is no current, and there is not a breath of air. By and by, before midnight, you will smell the soft land breeze blowing in puffs out of every little bay and indentation. There is no order needed. The men silently brace the yards and change the sheets over. The small jib is already bent in place of the big one, for the night is dark and some of those smart puffs will soon be like little squalls. Full and by. Hug the land, for there are no more reefs before Scalea. If you do not get aground on what you can see in Calabria, you will not get aground at all, says the old proverb. Briskly over two or three miles to the next point, and the breeze is gone again. While she is still forging ahead out go the sweeps, six or eight of them, and the men throw themselves forward over the long slender loom, as they stand. Half an hour to row, or more perhaps. Down helm, as you meet the next puff, and the good felucca heels over a little. And so through the night, the breeze freshening before the rising sun to die away in the first hot morning hours, just as you are abreast of Camerota. L'Infresco Point is ahead, not three miles away. It is of no use to row, for the breeze will come up before long and save you the trouble. But the sea is white and motionless. Far in the offing a Sicilian schooner and a couple of clumsy "martinganes"—there is no proper English name for the craft—are lying becalmed, with hanging sails. The men on board the felucca watch them and the sea. There is a shadow on the white, hazy horizon, then a streak, then a broad dark blue band. The schooner braces her top-sail yard and gets her main sheet aft. The martinganes flatten in their jibs along their high steeking bowsprits and jib-booms. Shift your sheets, too, now, for the wind is coming. Past L'Infresco with its lovely harbour of refuge, lonely as a bay in a desert island, its silent shade and its ancient spring. The wind is south by west at first, but it will go round in an hour or two, and before noon you

will make Scalea—stand out for the reef, the only one in Calabria—with a stern breeze. You have passed the most beautiful spot on the beautiful Italian coast, without seeing it. There, between the island of Dino and the cape lies San Nicola, with its grand deserted tower, its mighty cliffs, its deep, safe bay and its velvet sand. What matter? The wind is fair and you are for Calabria with twenty tons of macaroni from Amalfi. There is no time to be lost, either, for you will probably come home in ballast. Past Scalea, then, where tradition says that Judas Iscariot was born and bred and did his first murder. Right ahead is the sharp point of the Diamante, beyond that low shore where the cane brake grows to within fifty yards of the sea. Now you have run past the little cape, and are abreast of the beach. Down mainsail—down jib—down foresail. Let go the anchor while she forges, eight to nine lengths from the land, and let her swing round, stern to the sand. Clear away the dingy and launch her from amidships, and send a line ashore. Overboard with everything now, for beaching, capstan, chocks and all—the swell will wash them in. As the keel grates on the pebbles, the men jump into the water from the high stern and catch the drifting wood. Some plant the capstan, others pass the long hemp cable and reeve it through the fiddle block. A hand forward to slack out the cable as the heavy boat slowly creeps up out of the water. The men from other craft, already beached, lend a hand too and a score of stout fellows breast the long oars which serve for capstan bars. A little higher still. Now prop her securely and make all snug and ship-shape, and make fast the blade of an oar to one of the forward tholes, with the loom on the ground, for a ladder. You are safe in Calabria.

To-morrow at early dawn you must go into the hills, for you cannot sell a tenth of your cargo in the little village. Away you trudge on foot, across the rocky point, along the low flat beach by the cane brake, up the bed of the rivulet, where the wet green blades of the canes brush your face at every step. Shoes and stockings in hand you ford the shallow river, then, shod again, you begin the long ascent. You will need four good hours, or five, for you are not a landsman, your shoes hurt you, and you would rather reef topsails—aye, and take the lee earing, too, in any gale and a score of times, than breast that mountain. It cannot be helped. It is a hard life, though there are lazy days in the summer months, when the

wind will do your work for you. You must live, and earn your share; though they call you the master, neither boat nor cargo are yours, and you have to earn that share by harder work and with greater anxiety than the rest. But the world is green to-day. You remember a certain night last March—off Cape Orso in the gulf, when the wind they call the Puntì di Salerno was raging down and you had a jib bent for a mainsail, and your foresail close reefed and were shipping more green water than you like to think of. Pitch dark, too, and the little lighthouse on the cape not doing its best, as it seemed. The long line of the Salerno lights on the weather bow. No getting there, either, and no getting anywhere else apparently. Then you tried your luck. Amalfi might not be blowing. It was no joke to go about just then, but you managed it somehow, because you had half a dozen brave fellows with you. As she came up she was near missing stays and you sang out to let go the main hal-yards. The yard came down close by your head and nearly killed you, but she paid-off all right and went over on the starboard tack. Just under the cape the water was smooth. Just beyond it the devil was loose with all his angels, for Amalfi was blowing its own little hurricane on its own account from another quarter. Nothing for it but to go about and try Salerno again. What could you do in an open felucca with the green water running over? You did your best. Five hours out of that pitch black night you beat up, first trying one harbour and then the other. Amalfi gave in first, just as the waning moon rose, and you got under the breakwater at last.

You remember that last of your many narrow escapes to-day as you trudge up the stony mule-track through the green valleys, and it strikes you that after all it is easier to walk from Diamante all the way to Verbicaro, than to face a March storm in the gulf of Salerno in an open boat on a dark night. Up you go, past that strange ruin of the great Norman-Saracen castle standing alone on the steep little hill which rises out of the middle of the valley, commanding the roads on the right and the left. You have heard of the Saracens but not of the Normans. What kind of people lived there amongst those bristling ivy-grown towers? Thieves of course. Were they not Saracens and therefore Turks, according to your ethnology, and therefore brigands? It is odd that the government should have allowed them to build a castle just there. Perhaps they were stronger than

the government. You have never heard of Count Roger, either, though you know the story of Judas Iscariot by heart as you have heard it told many a time in Scalea. Up you go, leaving the castle behind you, up to that square house they call the tower on the brow of the hill. It is a lonely road, a mere sheep track over the heights. You are over it at last, and that is Verbicaro, over there on the other side of the great valley, perched against the mountain side, a rough, grey mass of red-roofed houses cropping up like red-tipped rocks out of a vast, sloping vineyard. And now there are people on the road, slender, barefooted, brown women in dark wine-coloured woollen skirts and scarlet cloth bodices much the worse for wear, treading lightly under half-a-quintal weight of grapes; well-to-do peasant men — galantuomini, they are all called in Calabria — driving laden mules before them, their dark blue jackets flung upon one shoulder, their white stockings remarkably white, their short homespun breeches far from ragged, as a rule, but their queer little pointed hats mostly colourless and weather-beaten. Boys and girls, too, meet you and stare at you, or overtake you at a great pace and almost run past you, with an enquiring backward glance, each carrying something — mostly grapes or figs. Out at last, by the little chapel, upon what is the beginning of an inland carriage road — in a land where even the one-wheeled wheelbarrow has never been seen. The grass grows thick among the broken stones, and men and beasts have made a narrow beaten track along the extreme outside edge of the precipice. The new bridge which was standing in all its spick and span newness when you came last year, is a ruin now, washed away by the spring freshets. A glance tells you that the massive-looking piers were hollow, built of one thickness of stone, shell-fashion, and filled with plain earth. Somebody must have cheated. Nothing new in that. They are all thieves nowadays, seeking to eat, as you say in your dialect, with a strict simplicity which leaves nothing to the imagination. At all events this bridge was a fraud, and the peasants clamber down a steep footpath they have made through its ruins, and up the other side.

And now you are in the town. The streets are paved, but Verbicaro is not Naples, not Salerno, not even Amalfi. The pavement is of the roughest cobble stones, and the pigs are the scavengers. Pigs everywhere, in the streets, in the houses, at the windows, on the

steps of the church in the market-place, to right and left, before you and behind you – like the guns at Balaclava. You never heard of the Six Hundred, though your father was boatswain of a Palermo grain bark and lay three months in the harbour of Sebastapol during the fighting.

Pigs everywhere, black, grunting and happy. Red-skirted, scarlet-bodied women everywhere, too, all moving and carrying something. Galantuomini loafing at most of the corners, smoking clay pipes with cane stems, and the great Jew shopkeeper's nose just visible from a distance as he stands in the door of his dingy den. Dirtier and dirtier grow the cobble stones as you go on. Brighter and brighter the huge bunches of red peppers fastened by every window, thicker and thicker on the upper walls and shaky balconies the black melons and yellowish grey cantelopes hung up to keep in the high fresh air, each slung in a hitch of yarn to a nail of its own.

Here and there some one greets you. What have you to sell? Will you take a cargo of pears? Good this year, like all the fruit. The figs and grapes will not be dry for another month. They nod and move on, as you pass by them. Verbicaro is a commercial centre, in spite of the pigs. A tall, thin priest meets you, with a long black cigar in his mouth. When he catches your eye he takes it from between his teeth and knocks the ash off, seeing that you are a stranger. Perhaps it is not very clerical to smoke in the streets. But who cares? This is Verbicaro – and besides, it is not a pipe. Monks smoke pipes. Priests smoke cigars.

One more turn down a narrow lane – darkest and dirtiest of all the lanes, the cobble stones only showing here and there above the universal black puddle. Yet the air is not foul and many a broad street by the Basso Porto in Naples smells far worse. The keen high atmosphere of the Calabrian mountains is a mighty purifier of nastiness, and perhaps the pig is not to be despised after all, as sanitary engineer, scavenger and street sweeper.

This is Don Pietro Casale's house, the last on the right, with the steep staircase running up outside the building to the second story. And the staircase has an iron railing, and so narrows the lane that a broad shouldered man can just go by to the cabbage garden beyond without turning sideways. On the landing at the top, outside the

closed door and waiting for visitors, sits the pig—a pig larger, better fed and by one shade of filthiness cleaner than other pigs. Don Pietro Casale has been seen to sweep his pig with a broken willow broom, after it has rained.

"Do you take him for a Christian?" asked his neighbour, in amazement, on the occasion.

"No," answered Don Pietro gravely. "He is certainly not a Christian. But why should he spoil the tablecloth with his muddy hog's back when my guests are at their meals? He is always running under the table for the scraps."

"And what are women for, except to wash tablecloths?" inquired the neighbour contemptuously.

But he got no answer. Few people ever get more than one from Don Pietro Casale, whose eldest son is doing well at Buenos Ayres, and in whose house the postmaster takes his meals now that he is a widower.

For Don Pietro and his wife Donna Concetta sell their own wine and keep a cook-shop, besides a guest-room with a garret above it, and two beds, with an old-fashioned store of good linen in old-fashioned iron-bound chests. At the time of the fair they can put up a dozen or fourteen guests. People say indeed that the place is not so well managed, nor the cooking so good since poor Carmela died, the widow of Ruggiero dei Figli del Rè—Roger of the Children of the King.

For this is the place where the Children of the King lived and died for many generations, and this house of Don Pietro Casale was theirs, and the one on the other side of the cabbage garden, a smaller and poorer one, in which Carmela died. The garden itself was once theirs, and the vineyard beyond, and the olive grove beyond that, and much good land in the valley. For they were galantuomini, and even thought themselves something better, and sometimes, when the wine was new, they talked of noble blood and said that their first ancestor had indeed been a son of a king who had given him all Verbicaro for his own. True it is, at least, that they had no other name. Through generation after generation they were christened Ruggiero, Guglielmo, and Sebastiano "of the Children of the

King." Thus they had anciently appeared in the ill-kept parish registers, and thus was Ruggiero inscribed for the conscription under the new law.

And now, as you know, gaunt, weather-beaten Luigione, licensed master in the coast trade and just now captain of the Sorrentine felucca Giovannina, from Amalfi to Diamante with macaroni, there are no more of the Children of the King in old Verbicaro, and their goods have fallen into divers hands, but chiefly into those very grasping and close-holding ones of Don Pietro Casale and his wife. But they are not all dead by any means, as you know also and you have even lately seen and talked with one of the fair-haired fellows, who bears the name.

For the Children of the King have almost always had yellow hair and blue eyes, though they have more than once taken to themselves black-browed, brown-skinned Calabrian girls as wives. And this makes one, who knows something more about your country than you do, Luigione—though in a less practical way I confess—this makes one think that they may be the modern descendants of some Norman knightling who took Verbicaro for himself one morning in the old days, and kept it; or perhaps even the far-off progeny of one of those bright-eyed, golden-locked Goths who made slaves of the degenerate Latins some thirteen centuries ago or more, and treated their serfs indeed more like cattle than slaves until almost the last of them were driven into the sea with their King Teias by Narses. But a few were left in the southern fastnesses and in the Samnite hills, and northward through the Apennines, scattered here and there where they had been able to hold their own; and some, it is said, forgot Theodoric and Witiges and Totila and Teias, and took service in the Imperial Guard at Constantinople, as Harold of Norway and some of our own hard-fisted sailor fathers did in later years.

Be that as it may—and no one knows how it was—the Children of the King have yellow hair and blue eyes to this present time, and no one would take them for Calabrians, nor for Sicilians, still less for monkey-limbed, hang-dog mouthed, lying, lubberly Neapolitans who can neither hand, reef nor steer, nor tell you the difference between a bowline and a buntling, though you may show them a

dozen times, nor indeed can do anything but steal and blaspheme and be the foulest, filthiest crew that Captain Satan ever shipped for the Long Voyage. Not fit to slush down the mast of a collier, the best of them.

It must be a dozen years since Carmela died in that little house beyond the cabbage garden. It was a glorious night in September—a strange night in some ways, and not like other nights one remembers, for the full moon had risen over the hills to the left, filling the world with a transparent vapour of silver, so clear and so bright that the very light seemed good to breathe as it is good to drink crystal water from a spring. Verbicaro was all asleep behind Don Pietro Casale's house, and in front, from the terrace before the guest-room, one could see the great valley far below beyond the cabbages, deep and mysterious, with silver-dashed shadows and sudden blacknesses, and bright points of white where the moon's rays fell upon a solitary hut. And on the other side of the valley, above Grisolia, a great round-topped mountain and on the top of the mountain an enormous globe of cloud, full of lightning that flashed unceasingly, so that the cloud was at one instant like a ball of silver in the moonlight, and at the next like a ball of fire in darkness. Not a breath stirred the air, and the strange thunderstorm flashed out its life through the long hours, stationary and alone at its vast height.

In the great silence two sounds broke the stillness from time to time; the deep satisfied grunt of a pig turning his fattest side to the cobble stones as he slept—and the long, low wail of a woman dying in great pain.

The little room was very dark. A single wick burned in the boat-shaped cup of the tall earthenware lamp, and there was little oil left in the small receptacle. On the high trestle bed, upon the thinnest of straw mattresses, decently covered with a coarse brown blanket, lay a pale woman, emaciated to a degree hardly credible. A clean white handkerchief was bound round her brow and covered her head, only a scanty lock or two of fair hair escaping at the side of her face. The features were calm and resigned, but when the pain of the death agony seized upon her the thin lips parted and deep lines of suffering appeared about the mouth; She seemed to struggle as best

she could, but the low, quavering cry would not be stifled—lower and more trembling each time it was renewed.

An old barefooted friar with a kindly eye and a flowing grey beard stood beside her. He had done what he could to comfort her and was going away. But she feebly begged him to stay a little longer. In an interval, while she had no pain, she spoke to her boys.

"Ruggiero—Sebastiano—dear sons—you could not save me, and I am going.  
God bless you. Our Lady help you—remember—you are Children of the  
King—remember—ah."

She sighed heavily and her jaw fell as another sort of pallor spread suddenly over her face. Poor Carmela was dead at last, after weeks of sickness, worked to death, as the neighbours said, by Pietro Casale and his wife Concetta.

She left those two boys, lean, poorly clad lads of ten and twelve years, yellow haired and blue eyed, with big bones and hunger-pinched faces. They could just remember seeing their father brought home dead with a knife wound in his breast six years earlier. Now they took hands as they looked at their dead mother with a sort of wondering gaze. There were no tears, no cries of despair—least of all did they show any fear.

Old Padre Michele made them kneel down, still hand in hand, while he recited prayers for the dead. The boys knew some of the responses, learned by ear with small regard for Latinity, though they understood what they were saying. When the monk got up they rose also and looked again at the poor dead face.

"You have no relations, my children," said the old man.

"We are alone," answered the elder boy in a quiet, clear voice.  
"But I will take care of Sebastiano."

"And I will help Ruggiero," said the younger in much the same tone.

"You are hungry?"

"Always," answered both together, without hesitation.

Padre Michele would have smiled, but the hungry faces and the mournful tone told him how true the spoken word must be. He fumbled in the pockets in the breast of his gown, and presently produced a few shady-looking red and white sugar sweetmeats, bullet-like in shape and hardness.

"It is all I have now, my children," said the old man. "I picked them up yesterday at a wedding, to give them to a poor little girl who was ill. But she was dead when I got there, so you may have them."

The lads took the stuff thankfully and crunched the stony balls with white, wolfish teeth.

With Padre Michele's help they got an old woman from amongst the neighbours to rouse herself and do what was necessary. When all was over she took the brown blanket as payment without asking for it, smuggling it out of the mean room under her great black handkerchief. But it was day then, and Don Pietro Casale was wide awake. He stopped her in the narrow part of the lane at the foot of his own staircase, and forcibly undid the bundle, to the old woman's inexpressible discomfiture. He said nothing, as he took it from her and carried it away, but his thin grey lips smiled quietly. The old woman shook her fist at him behind his back and cursed his dead under her breath. From Rome to Palermo, swear at a man if you please, call him by bad names, and he will laugh at you. But curse his dead relations or their souls, and you had better keep beyond the reach of his knife, or of his hands if he have no weapon. So the old woman was careful that Pietro Casale should not hear her.

"Managgia l'anima di chi t'è morto!" she muttered, as she hobbled away.

Everything in the room where Carmela died belonged to Don Pietro, and he took everything. He found the two boys standing together, looking across the fence of the cabbage garden down at the distant valley and over at the height opposite, beyond which the sea was hidden.

"Eh! You good-for-nothings!" he called out to them. "Is nothing done to-day because the mother is dead? No bread to-night, then—you know that."

"We will not work for you any more," answered Ruggiero, the elder, as both turned round.

Don Pietro went up to them. He had a short stout stick in his hand, tough and black with age, and he lifted it as though to drive them to work. They waited quietly till it should please him to come to close quarters, which he did without delay. I have said that he was a man of few words. But the Children of the King were not like Calabrian boys, children though they were. Their wolfish teeth were very white as they waited for him with parted lips, and there was an odd blue light in their eyes which is not often seen south of Goth-land.

They were but twelve and ten years old, but they could fight already, in their small way, and had tried it many a time with shepherd lads on the hill-side. But Don Pietro despised children and aimed a blow at Ruggiero's right shoulder. The blow did not take effect, but a moment had not passed before the old peasant lay sprawling on his back with both the boys on top of him.

"You cannot hurt the mother now," said Ruggiero. "Hit him as I do, Bastianello!"

And the four bony boyish fists fell in a storm of savage blows upon Don Pietro Casale's leathern face and eyes and head and thin grey lips.

"That is for the mother," said Ruggiero. "Another fifty a-piece for ourselves."

The wiry old peasant struggled desperately, and at last threw himself free of them and staggered to his feet.

"Quick, Bastianello!" shouted Ruggiero.

In the twinkling of an eye they were over the fence and running at full speed for the valley. Don Pietro bruised, dazed and half-blinded, struggled after them, crashing through hedges and stumbling into ditches while he shouted for help in his pursuit. But his heavy shoes hampered him, and at best he was no match for them in speed. His face was covered with purple blotches and his eyelids

were swelling at a terrible rate. Out of breath and utterly worn out he stood still and steadied himself against a crooked olive-tree. He could no longer hear even the footsteps of the lads before him.

They were beyond his reach now. The last of the Children of the King had left Verbicaro, where their fathers had lived and died since darker ages than Calabrian history has accurately recorded.

