

CHAPTER XXV

TURNING THE TABLES

No sooner had the notes ceased than Kenneth sprang from behind a rock that had concealed him and grasped the child in his strong arms, trying to cover her mouth at the same time to prevent her from crying out.

Tato developed surprising strength. The adventure of yesterday had so thoroughly frightened her that when she found herself again seized she struggled madly. The boy found that he could scarcely hold her, so he enfolded her in both his arms and, letting her scream as she might, picked up her tiny form and mounted the slope of the hill, leaping from rock to rock until he came to a broad boulder twenty feet or more above the path. Here he paused, panting, and awaited results.

The rock doors had opened promptly. Even while Kenneth struggled with the brigand's daughter Patsy could see straight through the tunnel and into the valley beyond. The child had dropped her bundle in the effort to escape, and while Kenneth was leaping with her up the crags Patsy ran forward and secured the money, returning quickly to her position facing the tunnel.

And now they heard shouts and the sound of hastening feet as Il Duca ran from the tunnel, followed closely by two of his brigands. They paused a

moment at the entrance, as if bewildered, but when the father saw his child in the grasp of a stranger and heard her screams he answered with a roar of fury and prepared to scramble up the rock to rescue her.

That was where Patsy showed her mettle. She hastily covered the brigand with her revolver and shouted warningly:

"Stop, or you are a dead man!"

It was wonderfully dramatic and effective.

Il Duca shrank back, scowling, for he had no weapon at hand. Leaning against the entrance to his valley he glared around to determine the number of his foes and the probable chance of defeating them.

Kenneth laughed boyishly at his discomfiture. Kneeling down, the youth grasped Tato by both wrists and lowered her body over the edge of the rock so that her feet just touched a little ledge beneath. He continued to hold fast to her wrists, though, and there she remained, stretched against the face of the rock fronting the path, in full view of all, but still unable to move.

From this exasperating sight Il Duca glanced at Patsy. She was holding the revolver rigidly extended, and her blue eyes blazed with the excitement of the moment. It was a wonder she did not pull the trigger inadvertently, and the thought that she might do so caused the brigand

to shudder.

Turning half around he beheld a third enemy quietly seated upon the rocks directly across the path from Kenneth, her pose unconcerned as she rested her chin lightly upon her left hand. It was Beth, who held her revolver nonchalantly and gazed upon the scene below her with calm interest.

The Duke gave a cough to clear his throat. His men hung back of him, silent and motionless, for they did not like this absolute and dangerous defiance of their chief.

"Tell me, then, Tato," he called in English, "what is the cause of this trouble?"

"I do not know, my father, except that these are friends of Signor Merrick who have secretly followed me here."

The carefully arranged programme gave Patsy a speech at this point, but she had entirely forgotten it.

"Let me explain," said Beth, coldly. "You have dared to detain in your robbers' den the persons of Mr. Merrick and Count Ferralti. You have also demanded a ransom for their release. That is brigandage, which is denounced by the laws of Sicily. We have appealed to the authorities, but they are helpless to assist us. Therefore, being Americans, we have

decided to assist ourselves. We command you to deliver to us on this spot, safe and uninjured, the persons of our friends, and that without any unnecessary delay."

The Duke listened with a sneer.

"And if we refuse, signorina?"

"If you refuse--if you do not obey at once--I swear that I will shoot your child, Tato, whose body yonder awaits my bullet. And afterward I shall kill you."

As she spoke she levelled the revolver and aimed it carefully at the exposed body of the child.

The brigand paled, and grasped the rock to steady himself.

"Bah! No girl can shoot from that distance," he exclaimed, scornfully.

"Indeed! Take care of your finger," called Beth, and a shot echoed sharply along the mountain side.

The brigand jumped and uttered a yell, at the same time whipping his right hand underneath his left arm; for Beth's bullet had struck one of his fingers and then flattened itself against the cliff.

That settled all argument, as far as Il Duca was concerned; for he now had ample evidence that the stern-eyed girl above him could shoot, and was not to be trifled with. All his life he had ruled by the terror of his threats; to-day he was suddenly vanquished by a determination he dared not withstand.

"Enough!" he cried. "Have your way."

He spoke to his men in Italian, and they hastened through the tunnel, glad to escape.

Following their departure there was a brief silence, during which all stood alert. Then, Tato, still half suspended against the cliff, said in a clear, soft voice:

"Father, if you think you can escape, let them shoot me, and keep your prisoners. The money for their ransom I brought to this place, and they will pay it even yet to save their friends from your vengeance. Do not let these wild Americans defeat us, I beg of you. I am not afraid. Save yourself, and let them shoot me, if they will!"

Kenneth afterward declared that he thought "the jig was up" then, for they had no intention whatever of harming Tato. It was all merely a bit of American "bluff," and it succeeded because the brigand was a coward, and dared not emulate his daughter's courage.

"No, no, Tato!" cried the Duke, brokenly, as he wrung his hands in anguish. "There is more money to be had, but I have only one child. They shall not harm a hair of your head, my pretty one!"

Patsy wanted to yell "bravo!" but wisely refrained. Her eyes were full of tears, though, and her resolution at ebb tide.

Fortunately the men had made haste. They returned with surprising promptness, pushing the amazed prisoners before them.

Uncle John, as he emerged from the tunnel, looked around upon the tragic scene and gasped:

"Well, I declare!"

Count Ferralti was more composed, if equally surprised. He lifted his hat politely to Beth and Patsy, and smiled with great satisfaction.

"You are free," said Il Duca, harshly. "Go!"

They lost no time in getting the brigands between themselves and the mouth of the tunnel, and then Kenneth gently drew Tato to a place beside him and assisted her to clamber down the path.

"Good bye, little one," he said, pleasantly; "you're what we call a 'brick' in our country. I like you, and I'm proud of you."

Tato did not reply. With streaming eyes she was examining her father's shattered hand, and sobbing at sight of the blood that dripped upon the rocks at his feet.

"Get inside!" called Beth, sharply; "and close up that rock. Lively, now!"

The "girl who could shoot" still sat toying with her revolver, and the mountaineers obeyed her injunction. The rock promptly closed, and the group of Americans was left alone.

Then Beth came slowly down to where Patsy was hugging Uncle John in a wild frenzy of delight, and Count Ferralti was shaking Kenneth's hand with a face eloquent of emotion.

"Come," said she, her voice sounding faint and weary, "let us get away from here. It was a pretty game, while it lasted, but I'll feel safer when we are home again. Where's the money?"

"I've got it," said Kenneth, holding up the package.

"What! didn't you pay?" demanded Uncle John, astounded.

"Of course not, dear," said Patsy, gleefully. "Did you think your nieces would let you be robbed by a bunch of dagoes?"

Ferralti caught hold of Beth's swaying form.

"Look after your cousin," he said, sharply. "I think she has fainted!"