

CHAPTER XXVIII

DREAMS AND DRESS-MAKING

Tato was now one of the family. They left Taormina the next day, and Frascatti drove all the girls in his victoria to the station.

"You must come again, signorini," said he, looking regretful at their departure. "Next year the fountain of the ice cream soda will be in operation, like those you have in Chicago, which is America. Our culture increases with our civilization. It is even hinted that Il Duca is to abandon our island forever. He has been interesting to us, but not popular, and you will not miss him when you come again to find he is not here. If this time he has caused you an inconvenience, I am sorry. It is regrettable, but,--"

"But it is so!" said Patsy, laughing.

Tato was again transformed. Patricia, who was the smallest of the three nieces, though not especially slim, had quickly altered one of her own pretty white gowns to fit the child, and as she was deft with her needle and the others had enthusiastically assisted her, Tato now looked more like a fairy than ever.

It was really wonderful what a suitable dress could do for the tiny

Sicilian maid. She had lost her free and boyish manner and become shy and retiring with strangers, although when in the society of the three nieces she was as sweet and frank as ever. She wore her new gown gracefully, too, as if well accustomed to feminine attire all her life. The only thing now needed, as Patsy said, was time in which to grow her hair, which had always been cut short, in boyish fashion.

They were a merry party when they boarded the train for Syracuse, and Uncle John arranged with the guard to secure two adjoining compartments all to themselves, that they might have plenty of room.

"Where did you put the money, Uncle John?" Beth whispered, when at last they were whirling along and skirting the base of Mt. Etna toward the Catania side.

"I've hidden it in my trunk," he replied, in the same confidential tone.

"There is no bank in this neighborhood to receive it, so I decided to carry it with us."

"But will it be safe in the trunk?" she enquired.

"Of course, my dear. Who would think of looking there for fifty thousand dollars? And no one knows we happen to have so much money with us."

"What did the Count--I mean, Mr. Weldon--do with his ransom?"

"Carries it in his satchel, so he can keep it with him and have an eye on it. It's a great mistake, Beth, to do such a thing as that. It'll make him uneasy every minute, and he won't dare to let a facchino handle his grip. But in my case, on the other hand, I know it's somewhere in the baggage car, so I don't have to worry."

The journey was a delightful one. The road skirted the coast through the oldest and most picturesque part of Sicily, and it amazed them to observe that however far they travelled Etna was always apparently next door, and within reaching distance.

At Aci Castello they were pointed out the seven Isles of the Cyclops, which the blind Polyphemus once hurled after the crafty Ulysses. Then they came to Catania, which is the second largest city in Sicily, but has little of historic interest. Here they were really at the nearest point to the mighty volcano, but did not realize it because it always seemed to be near them. Eighteen miles farther they passed Leontinoi, which in ancient days dared to rival Siracusa itself, and an hour later the train skirted the bay and Capo Santa Panagia and slowly came to a halt in that city which for centuries dominated all the known world and was more powerful and magnificent in its prime than Athens itself--Syracuse.

The day had become cloudy and gray and the wind whistled around them with a chill sweep as they left their coach at the station and waited for Kenneth to find carriages. Afterward they had a mile to drive to

their hotel; for instead of stopping in the modern town Uncle John had telegraphed for rooms at the Villa Politi, which is located in the ancient Achradina, at the edge of the Latomia de Cappuccini. By the time they arrived there they were blue with cold, and were glad to seek the warm rooms prepared for them and pass the remainder of the afternoon unpacking and "getting settled."

"I'm afraid," said Patsy, dolefully, "that we shall miss the bright sunshine and warmth of Taormina, Tato."

"Oh, it is not always warm there, nor is it always cold here," replied the child. "Indeed, signorina, I have heard that the climate of Siracusa is very delightful."

"It doesn't look it," returned Patsy; "but it may improve."

The interior of the hotel was comfortable, though, however bleak the weather might be outside. A good dinner put them all in a better humor and they passed the evening watching the strangers assembled in the parlors and wondering where they had come from and who they were.

"That money," whispered Uncle John to Beth, as he kissed her good night, "is still as safe as can be. I've lost the key to my trunk, and now I can't even get at it myself."

"Lost it!" she exclaimed.

"Yes; but that won't matter. It's the big trunk that holds the things I don't often use, and if I can't unlock it no one else can, that's certain. So I shall rest easy until I need something out of it, and then I'll get a locksmith to pick the lock."

"But I wish you hadn't lost the key," said the girl, thoughtfully.

"Strikes me it's good luck. Pleasant dreams, my dear. I can fancy Arthur Weldon lying awake all night with his dreadful thirty thousand tucked under his pillow. It's a great mistake to carry so much money with you, Beth, for you're sure to worry about it."

The next morning when they came down to breakfast they were all amazed at the gorgeous sunshine and the genial temperature that had followed the dreary afternoon of their arrival. Syracuse was transformed, and from every window of the hotel the brilliant glow of countless flowers invited one to wander in the gardens, which are surpassed by few if any in the known world.

The Villa Politi stood so near the edge of a monstrous quarry that it seemed as if it might topple into the abyss at any moment. Our friends were on historic ground, indeed, for these quarries--or latomia, as they are called--supplied all the stone of which the five cities of ancient Syracuse were built--cities which in our age have nearly, if not quite, passed out of existence. The walls of the quarry are a hundred feet in

depth, and at the bottom are now acres upon acres of the most delightful gardens, whose luxuriance is attributable to the fact that they are shielded from the winds while the sun reaches them nearly all the day. There are gardens on the level above, and beautiful ones, too; but these in the deep latomia are the most fascinating.

The girls could scarcely wait to finish breakfast before rushing out to descend the flights of iron steps that lead to the bottom of the vast excavation. And presently they were standing on the ground below and looking up at the vine covered cliffs that shut out all of the upper world.

It was peaceful here, and soothing to tired nerves. Through blooming shrubbery and along quiet paths they might wander for hours, and at every step find something new to marvel at and to delight the senses.

Here were ancient tombs cut from the solid rock--one of them that of an American midshipman who died in Syracuse and selected this impressive and lovely vault for his burial place. And there stood the famous statue of Archimedes, who used in life to wander in this very latomia.

"Once," said Mr. Watson, musingly, "there were seven thousand Athenian prisoners confined in this very place, and allowed to perish through starvation and disease. The citizens of Syracuse--even the fine ladies and the little children--used to stand on the heights above and mock at the victims of their king's cruelty."

"Couldn't they climb out?" asked Patsy, shuddering at the thought that some of the poor prisoners might have died on the very spot her feet now trod.

"No, dear. And it is said the guards constantly patrolled the edge to slay any who might venture to make the attempt."

"Wasn't it dreadful!" she exclaimed. "But I'm glad they have made a flower garden of it now. Somehow, it reminds me of a cemetery."

But there were other interesting sights to be seen at Syracuse, and they laid out a systematic programme of the places they would visit each morning while they remained there. The afternoons were supposed to be reserved for rest, but the girls were so eager to supply Tato with a fitting wardrobe that they at once began to devote the afternoons to shopping and dress-making.

The child had placed in Uncle John's keeping a liberally supplied purse, which the Duke wished to be applied to the purchase of whatever his daughter might need or desire.

"He wants me to dress as you do," said Tato, simply; "and because you will know what is fitting my station and will be required in my future life, he has burdened you with my society. It was selfish in my father, was it not? But but--I wanted so much to be with you--because you are

good to me!"

"And we're mighty glad to have you with us," answered Patsy. "It's no end of fun getting a girl a whole new outfit, from top to toe; and, aside from that, we already love you as if you were our little sister."

Beth and Louise equally endorsed this statement; and indeed the child was so sweet and pretty and so grateful for the least kindness bestowed upon her that it was a pleasure to assist and counsel her.

Tato looked even smaller in girls' clothing than in boys', and she improved so rapidly in her manners by constantly watching the nieces that it was hard to imagine she had until now been all unused to polite society. Already they began to dread the day when her father would come to claim her, and the girls and Uncle John had conceived a clever plan to induce the Duke to let his daughter travel with them on the continent and then go for a brief visit to them in America.

"By that time," declared Louise, "Tato's education will be accomplished, and she will be as refined and ladylike as any girl of her age we know. Blood will tell, they say, and the monk who taught her must have been an intelligent and careful man."

"She knows more of history and languages than all the rest of us put together," added Beth.

"And, having adopted her, we mustn't do the thing by halves," concluded Patsy; "so our darling little brigandess must tease her papa to let her stay with us as long as possible."

Tato smiled and blushed with pleasure. It was very delightful to know she had such enthusiastic friends. But she was afraid the Duke would not like to spare her for so long a time as a visit to America would require.

"You leave him to me," said Uncle John. "I'll argue the case clearly and logically, and after that he will have to cave in gracefully."

Meantime the dainty gowns and pretty costumes were one by one finished and sent to the hotel, and the girls ransacked the rather inadequate shops of Syracuse for the smartest things in lingerie that could be procured. As they were determined to "try everything on" and see how their protégé looked in her finery, Tato was now obliged to dress for dinner and on every other possible occasion, and she not only astonished her friends by her loveliness but drew the eye of every stranger as surely as the magnet attracts the needle.

Even in Sicily, where the Greek type of beauty to-day exists more perfectly than in Helene, there were few to compare with Tato, and it was only natural that the Americans should be very proud of her.

Kenneth was sketching a bit of the quarry and the old monastery beyond

it, with the blue sea glimmering in the distance. Sometimes he would join the others in their morning trips to the catacombs, the cathedrals or the museum; but the afternoons he devoted to his picture, and the others came to the gardens with him and sat themselves down to sew or read beside his easel.

Arthur Weldon was behaving very well indeed; and although a good deal of the credit belonged to Louise, who managed him with rare diplomatic ability, Uncle John grew to like the young man better each day, and had no fault whatever to find with him.

He was still rather silent and reserved; but that seemed a part of his nature, inherited doubtless from his father, and when he chose to talk his conversation was interesting and agreeable.

Kenneth claimed that Arthur had a bad habit of "making goo-goo eyes" at Louise; but the young man's manner was always courteous and judicious when addressing her, and he managed to conceal his love with admirable discretion--at least when others were present.

Uncle John's private opinion, confided in secret to his friend Mr. Watson, was that Louise "really might do worse; that is, if they were both of the same mind when they grew up."

And so the days passed pleasantly away, and the time for their departure from Syracuse drew near.

On the last morning all of them--with the exception of Tato, who pleaded a headache--drove to the Latomia del Paradiso to see the celebrated "Ear of Dionysius"--that vast cavern through which the tyrant is said to have overheard every whisper uttered by the prisoners who were confined in that quarry. There is a little room at the top of the cliff, also built from the rock, where it is claimed Dionysius sat and played eavesdropper; and it is true that one in that place can hear the slightest sound uttered in the chamber below.

Afterward the amphitheatre and the ancient street of the tombs were paid a final visit, with a stop at San Giovanni, where St. Paul once preached. And at noon the tourists returned to the hotel hungry but enthusiastic, in time for the table-d'-hote luncheon.