

CHAPTER XXIX

TATO WINS

"This is funny!" cried Patsy, appearing before Uncle John with a white and startled face. "I can't find Tato anywhere."

"And her new trunk is gone from her room, as well as her gowns and everything she owns," continued Beth's clear voice, over her cousin's shoulder.

Uncle John stared at them bewildered. Then an expression of anxiety crept over his kindly face.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"There can't be a mistake, Uncle. She's just gone."

"None of you has offended, or annoyed the child, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, Uncle. She kissed us all very sweetly when we left her this morning."

"I can't understand it."

"Nor can we."

"Could her father have come for her, do you think?" suggested Mr. Merrick, after a moment's thought.

"I can't imagine her so ungrateful as to leave us without a word," said Patsy. "I know Tato well, Uncle, and the dear child would not hurt our feelings for the world. She loves us dearly."

"But she's a queer thing," added Louise, "and I don't trust her altogether. Sometimes I've surprised a look in her eyes that wasn't as innocent and demure as she would have us imagine her."

"Oh, Louise!"

"And there's another reason."

"What is it?"

"She reformed too suddenly."

Uncle John slapped his forehead a mighty blow as a suspicious and dreadful thought flashed across his mind. But next instant he drew a long breath and smiled again.

"It was lucky I lost that key to the trunk," he observed, still a little

ashamed of his temporary lack of confidence in Tato. "It's been locked ever since we left Taormina, so the child couldn't be tempted by that."

"She wouldn't touch your money for the world!" said Patsy, indignantly.

"Tato is no thief!"

"She comes of a race of thieves, though," Beth reminded her.

"I wonder if Arthur's money is still safe," remarked Louise, following the line of thought suggested.

As if with one accord they moved down the hall to the door of the young man's room.

"Are you in, Arthur?" asked Uncle John, knocking briskly.

"Yes, sir."

He opened his door at once, and saw with surprise the little group of anxious faces outside.

"Is your money safe?" asked Uncle John.

Weldon gave them a startled glance and then ran to his dresser and pulled open a drawer. After a moment's fumbling he turned with a smile.

"All safe, sir."

Uncle John and his nieces were visibly relieved.

"You see," continued Arthur, "I've invented a clever hiding-place, because the satchel could not be left alone and I didn't wish to lug it with me every step I took. So I placed the packages of bills inside the leg of a pair of trousers, and put them in a drawer with some other clothing at top and bottom. A dozen people might rummage in that drawer without suspecting the fact that money is hidden there. I've come to believe the place is as good as a bank; but you startled me for a minute, with your question. What's wrong?"

"Tato's gone."

"Gone!"

"Departed bag and baggage."

"But your fifty thousand, sir. Is it safe?"

"It has to be," answered Uncle John. "It is in a steel-bound, double-locked trunk, to which I've lost the key. No bank can beat that, my boy."

"Then why did the child run away?"

They could not answer that.

"It's a mystery," said Patsy, almost ready to weep. "But I'll bet it's that cruel, wicked father of hers. Perhaps he came while we were out and wouldn't wait a minute."

"What does the hall porter say?" asked Kenneth, who had joined the group in time to overhear the last speech and guess what had happened.

"Stupid!" cried Uncle John. "We never thought of the hall-porter. Come back to our sitting room, and we'll have him up in a jiffy."

The portiere answered his hell with alacrity. The Americans were liberal guests.

The young lady? Ah, she had driven away soon after they had themselves gone. A thin-faced, dark-eyed man had called for her and taken her away, placing her baggage on the box of the carriage. Yes, she had paid her bill and tipped the servants liberally.

"Just as I suspected!" cried Patsy. "That horrid duke has forced her to leave us. Perhaps he was jealous, and feared we would want to keep her always. Was she weeping and miserable, porter?"

"No, signorina. She laughed and was very merry. And--but I had

forgotten! There is a letter which she left for the Signorina D'Oyle."

"Where?"

"In the office. I will bring it at once."

He ran away and quickly returned, placing a rather bulky parcel in the girl's hands.

"You read it, Uncle John," she said. "There can't be anything private in Tato's letter, and perhaps she has explained everything."

He put on his glasses and then took the missive and deliberately opened it. Tato wrote a fine, delicate hand, and although the English words were badly spelled she expressed herself quite well in the foreign tongue. With the spelling and lack of punctuation corrected, her letter was as follows:

"Dear, innocent, foolish Patsy: How astonished you will be to find I have vanished from your life forever; and what angry and indignant words you will hurl after poor Tato! But they will not reach me, because you will not know in which direction to send them, and I will not care whether you are angry or not.

"You have been good to me, Patsy, and I really love you--fully as much as I have fear of that shrewd and pretty cousin of yours, whose cold

eyes have made me tremble more than once. But tell Beth I forgive her, because she is the only clever one of the lot of you. Louise thinks she is clever, but her actions remind me of the juggler who explained his tricks before he did them, so that the audience would know how skillful he was."

"But oh, Patsy, what simpletons you all are! And because you have been too stupid to guess the truth I must bother to write it all down. For it would spoil much of my satisfaction and enjoyment if you did not know how completely I have fooled you.

"You tricked us that day in the mountain glen, and for the first time an Alcanta brigand lost his prisoners and his ransom money through being outwitted. But did you think that was the end? If so you failed to appreciate us.

"Look you, my dear, we could have done without the money, for our family has been robbing and accumulating for ages, with little need to expend much from year to year. It is all in the Bank of Italy, too, and drawing the interest, for my father is a wise man of business. That four hundred thousand lira was to have been our last ransom, and after we had fairly earned it you tricked us and did not pay.

"So my father and I determined to get even with you, as much through revenge as cupidity. We were obliged to desert the valley at once, because we were getting so rich that the government officials became

uneasy and warned us to go or be arrested. So we consulted together and decided upon our little plot, which was so simple that it has worked perfectly. We came to you with our sad story, and you thought we had reformed, and kindly adopted me as one of your party. It was so easy that I almost laughed in your foolish faces. But I didn't, for I can act. I played the child very nicely, I think, and you quite forgot I was a brigand's daughter, with the wild, free blood of many brave outlaws coursing in my veins. Ah, I am more proud of that than of my acting.

"Innocent as I seemed, I watched you all carefully, and knew from almost the first hour where the money had been put. I stole the key to Uncle John's trunk on the train, while we were going from Taormina to Syracuse; but I did not take the money from it because I had no better place to keep it, and the only danger was that he would force the lock some day. But Ferralti's money--I call him Ferralti because it is a prettier name than Weldon--bothered me for a long time. At the first he would not let that little satchel out of his sight, and when he finally did he had removed the money to some other place. I searched his room many times, but could not find his hiding place until last night. While he was at dinner I discovered the bills in one of the drawers of his dresser.

"But for this difficulty I should have left your charming society before, as my father has been secretly waiting for me for three days. Having located Ferralti's money I waited until this morning and when you had all left me I signalled to my father from my window and prepared to

disappear. It took but a few minutes to get the money from Uncle John's trunk and Arthur's trouser-leg. Much obliged for it, I'm sure. Then I packed up all my pretty dresses in my new trunk--for part of our plot was to use your good taste in fitting me out properly--and now I am writing this loving epistle before I leave.

"We shall go to Paris or Vienna or Cairo or London--guess which! We shall have other names--very beautiful ones--and be rich and dignified and respected. When I grow older I think I shall marry a prince and become a princess; but that will not interest you much, for you will not know that the great princess is your own little Tato.

"Tell Uncle John I have left the key to his trunk on the mantel, behind the picture of the madonna. I stuffed papers into Arthur's trouser leg to deceive him if he came back before I had a chance to escape. But I hoped you would discover nothing until you read this letter, for I wanted to surprise you. Have I? Then I am content. You tricked me once; but I have tricked you at the last, and the final triumph is mine.

"In spite of all, Patsy dear, I love you; for you are sweet and good, and although I would not be like you for the world I can appreciate your excellent qualities. Remember this when your anger is gone. I won't be able to visit you in America, but I shall always think of you in a more kindly way than I fear you will think of the Sicilian tomboy, TATO."