

CHAPTER XVI

TATO

When Uncle John passed through the west gate for a tramp along the mountain paths he was feeling in an especially happy and contented mood. The day was bright and balmy, the air bracing, the scenery unfolded step by step magnificent and appealing. To be in this little corner of the old world, amid ruins antedating the Christian era, and able to wholly forget those awful stock and market reports of Wall street, was a privilege the old gentleman greatly appreciated.

So away he trudged, exploring this path or that leading amongst the rugged cliffs, until finally he began to take note of his erratic wanderings and wonder where he was. Climbing an elevated rock near the path he poised himself upon its peak and studied the landscape spread out beneath him.

There was a patch of sea, with the dim Calabrian coast standing sentry behind it. The nearer coast was hidden from view, but away at the left was a dull white streak marking the old wall of Taormina, and above this the ruined citadel and the ancient castle of Mola--each on its separate peak.

"I must be getting back," he thought, and sliding down the surface of

the rock he presently returned to the path from whence he had climbed.

To his surprise he found a boy standing there and looking at him with soft brown eyes that were both beautiful and intelligent. Uncle John was as short as he was stout, but the boy scarcely reached to his shoulder. He was slender and agile, and clothed in a grey corduroy suit that was better in texture than the American had seen other Sicilian youths wear. As a rule the apparel of the children in this country seemed sadly neglected.

Yet the most attractive thing about this child was his face, which was delicate of contour, richly tinted to harmonize with his magnificent brown eyes, and so sensitive and expressive that it seemed able to convey the most subtle shades of emotion. He seemed ten or twelve years of age, but might have been much older.

As soon as the American had returned to the path the boy came toward him in an eager, excited way, and exclaimed:

"Is it not Signor Merrick?"

The English was fluent, and only rendered softer by the foreign intonation.

"It is," said Uncle John, cheerfully. "Where did you drop from, my lad? I thought these hills were deserted, until now."

"I am sent by a friend," answered the boy, speaking rapidly and regarding the man with appealing glances. "He is in much trouble, signore, and asks your aid."

"A friend? Who is it?"

"The name he gave me is Ferralti, signore. He is near to this place, in the hills yonder, and unable to return to the town without assistance."

"Ferralti. H-m-m. Is he hurt?"

"Badly, signore; from a fall on the rocks."

"And he sent for me?"

"Yes, signore. I know you by sight--who does not?--and as I hurried along I saw you standing on the rock. It is most fortunate. Will you hasten to your friend, then? I will lead you to him."

Uncle John hesitated. He ought to be getting home, instead of penetrating still farther into these rocky fastnesses. And Ferralti was no especial friend, to claim his assistance. But then the thought occurred that this young Italian had befriended both him and his nieces in an extremity, and was therefore entitled to consideration when trouble in turn overtook himself. The natural impulse of this thought

was to go to his assistance.

"All right, my lad," said he. "Lead on, and I'll see what can be done for Ferralti. Is it far?"

"Not far, signore."

With nervous, impatient steps the child started up the narrow path and Uncle John followed--not slowly, but scarcely fast enough to satisfy his zealous guide.

"What is your name, little one?"

"Tato, signore."

"Where do you live?"

"Near by, signore."

"And how did you happen to find Ferralti?"

"By chance, signore."

Uncle John saved his remaining breath for the climb. He could ask questions afterward.

The path was in a crevasse where the rocks seemed once to have split. It was narrow and steep, and before long ended in a cul de sac. The little man thought they had reached their destination, then; but without hesitation the boy climbed over a boulder and dropped into another path on the opposite side, holding out a hand to assist the American.

Uncle John laughed at the necessity, but promptly slid his stout body over the boulder and then paused to mop his brow.

"Much farther, Tato?"

"Just a step, signore."

"It is lucky you found Ferralti, or he might have died in these wilds without a soul knowing he was here."

"That is true, signore."

"Well, is this the path?"

"Yes, signore. Follow me, please."

The cliffs were precipitous on both sides of them. It was another crevasse, but not a long one. Presently the child came to a halt because the way ended and they could proceed no farther. He leaned against the rock and in a high-pitched, sweet voice sang part of a Sicilian ditty,

neither starting the verse nor ending it, but merely trilling out a fragment.

Uncle John regarded him wonderingly; and then, with a sudden suspicion, he demanded:

"You are not playing me false, Tato?"

"I, signore?" smiling frankly into the man's eyes; "you need never fear Tato, signore. To be your friend, and Signor Ferralti's friend, makes me very proud."

The rock he leaned against fell inward, noiselessly, and disclosed a passage. It was short, for there was light at the other end.

The strange child darted in at once.

"This way, signore. He is here!"

Uncle John drew back. He had forgotten until now that these mountains are dangerous. And something strange in the present proceedings, the loneliness of the place and the elfish character of his guide, suddenly warned him to be cautious.

"See here, my lad," he called: "I'll go no farther."

Instantly Tato was at his side again, grasping the man's hand in his tiny brown one and searching his face with pleading eyes.

"Ah, signore, you will not fail your friend, when he is so near you and in such great trouble? See! I who am a stranger and not even his countryman, even I weep for the poor young man, and long to comfort him. Do you, his friend, refuse him aid because you have fear of the wild mountains and a poor peasant boy?"

Tears really stood in the beautiful brown eyes. They rolled down his cheeks, as with both hands he pressed that of Uncle John and urged him gently forward.

"Oh, well; lead on, Tato. I'll see the other side of your tunnel, anyhow. But if you play me tricks, my lad--"

He paused, for a wonderful vision had opened before him. Coming through the short passage hewn in the rocks the American stood upon a ledge facing a most beautiful valley, that was hemmed in by precipitous cliffs on every side. From these stern barriers of the outside world the ground sloped gradually toward the center, where a pretty brook flowed, its waters sparkling like diamonds in the sunlight as it tumbled over its rocky bed. Groves of oranges and of olive, lemon and almond trees occupied much of the vale, and on a higher point at the right, its back to the wall of rock that towered behind it, stood a substantial yet picturesque mansion of stone, with several outbuildings scattered on

either side.

The valley seemed, indeed, a toy kingdom sequestered from the great outside world, yet so rich and productive within itself that it was independent of all else.

Uncle John gazed with amazement. Who could have guessed this delightful spot was hidden safe within the heart of the bleak, bare mountain surrounding it? But suddenly he bethought himself.

"What place is this, Tato?" he asked; "and where is our friend Ferralti, who needs me?"

There was no reply.

He turned around to find the boy had disappeared. Moreover, the passage had disappeared. Only a wall of rock was behind him, and although his eyes anxiously searched the rifts and cracks of its rough surface, no indication of the opening through which he had passed could be discovered.