

CHAPTER XXIII

BETH BEGINS TO PLOT

Once back in their sitting-room behind closed doors, Beth, Patsy and Kenneth got their three heads together and began eagerly to discuss a plot which Beth had hinted of on the way home and now unfolded in detail. And while they still whispered together a knock at the door startled them and made them look rather guilty until the boy answered the call and admitted little Tato.

The child's beautiful face wore a smile of demure satisfaction as Tato bowed respectfully to the young Americans.

Kenneth winked at Beth from behind the visitor's back.

"As you have a guest," he remarked, with a yawn that was somewhat rude, "I shall now go and take my nap."

"What, do you sleep so early in the day, you lazy-bones?" asked Patsy, brightly.

"Any time, my dear, is good enough for an overworked artist," he replied. "Au revoir, my cousins. See you at luncheon."

With this he strolled away, and when he had gone Beth said to Tato:

"Won't you sit down, signorina?"

"Do you mean me?" asked the child, as if surprised.

"Yes; I can see plainly that you are a girl."

"And a pretty one, too, my dear," added Patsy.

Tato blushed as if embarrassed, but in a moment smiled upon the American girls.

"Do you think me immodest, then?" she asked, anxiously.

"By no means, my dear," Beth assured her. "I suppose you have an excellent reason for wearing boys' clothes."

"So I have, signorina. I live in the mountains, where dresses catch in the crags, and bother a girl. And my father has always been heart-broken because he had no son, and likes to see me in this attire. He has many errands for me, too, where a boy may go unnoticed, yet a girl would attract too much attention. This is one of the errands, signorini. But now tell me, if you please, how have you decided to answer the letters of Signor Merrick and Signor Ferralti?"

"Oh, there was but one way to answer them, Tato," replied Beth, composedly. "We have sent Mr. Watson and our cousin Louise Merrick to Messina to get the money. If our friends in America act promptly Mr. Watson and Louise will return by to-morrow afternoon's train, and be prepared to make the payment."

"That is well, signorina," responded Tato.

"We are to give the money to you, I suppose?" said Patsy.

"Yes; I will return for it to-morrow afternoon," answered the child, with business-like gravity. Then she looked earnestly from one to the other of the two girls. "You must act discreetly, in the meantime, you know. You must not talk to anyone, or do anything to imperil your uncle's safety."

"Of course not, Tato."

"I beg you not, signorini. The uncle is a good man, and brave. I do not wish him to be injured."

"Nor do we, Tato."

"And the young man is not a coward, either. He has been kind to me. But he is sad, and not so pleasant to talk with as the uncle."

"True enough, Tato," said Beth.

Patsy had been examining the child with curious intentness. The little one was so lovely and graceful, and her voice sounded so soft and womanly, that Patsy longed to take her in her arms and hug her.

"How old are you, dear?" she asked.

Tato saw the friendly look, and answered with a smile.

"Perhaps as old as you, signorina, although I am so much smaller. I shall be fifteen in a month."

"So old!"

Tato laughed merrily.

"Ah, you might well say 'so young,' amico mia! To be grown up is much nicer; do you not think so? And then I shall not look such a baby as now, and have people scold me when I get in the way, as they do little bambini."

"But when you are grown you cannot wear boys' clothing, either."

Tato sighed.

"We have a saying in Sicily that 'each year has its sunshine and rain,' which means its sorrow and its joy," she answered. "Perhaps I sometimes think more of the tears than of the laughter, although I know that is wrong. Not always shall I be a mountaineer, and then the soft dresses of the young girls shall be my portion. Will I like them better? I do not know. But I must go now, instead of chattering here. Farewell, signorini, until to-morrow."

"Will you not remain with us?"

"Oh, no; although you are kind. I am expected home. But to-morrow I will come for the money. You will be silent?"

"Surely, Tato."

The child smiled upon them pleasantly. It was a relief to deal with two tender girls instead of cold and resentful men, such as she had sometimes met. At the door she blew a kiss to them, and darted away.

In the courtyard Frascatti saw her gliding out and discreetly turned his head the other way.

Tato took the old road, circling around the theatre and through the narrow, winding streets of the lower town to the Catania Gate. She looked back one or twice, but no one noticed her. If any of the villagers saw her approaching they slipped out of her path.

Once on the highway, however, Tato became lost in reflection. Her mission being successfully accomplished, it required no further thought; but the sweet young American girls had made a strong impression upon the lonely Sicilian maid, and she dreamed of their pretty gowns and ribbons, their fresh and comely faces, and the gentleness of their demeanor.

Tato was not gentle. She was wild and free and boyish, and had no pretty gowns whatever. But what then? She must help her father to get his fortune, and then he had promised her that some day they would go to Paris or Cairo and live in the world, and be brigands no longer.

She would like that, she thought, as she clambered up the steep paths; and perhaps she would meet these American girls again, or others like them, and make them her friends. She had never known a girl friend, as yet.

These ambitions would yesterday have seemed far in the dim future; but now that her stern old grandmother was gone it was possible her father would soon fulfill his promises. While the Duchessa lived she ruled them all, and she was a brigand to the backbone. Now her father's will prevailed, and he could refuse his child nothing.

Kenneth was not an expert detective, but he had managed to keep Tato in sight without being suspected by her. He had concealed himself near the Catania Gate, through which he knew she must pass, and by good luck she

had never looked around once, so intent were her musings.

When she came to the end of the path and leaned against the rock to sing the broken refrain which was the "open sesame" to the valley, the boy was hidden snug behind a boulder where he could watch her every movement.

Then the rock opened; Tato passed in, and the opening closed behind her.

Kenneth found a foothold and climbed up the wall of rock, higher and higher, until at last he crept upon a high ridge and looked over.

The hidden valley lay spread before him in all its beauty, but the precipice at his feet formed a sheer drop of a hundred feet or more, and he drew back with a shudder.

Then he took courage to look again, and observed the house, on the porch of which stood Tato engaged in earnest conversation with a tall, dark Sicilian. Uncle John was nowhere to be seen, but the boy understood that he was there, nevertheless, and realized that his prison was so secure that escape was impossible.

And now he climbed down again, a much more difficult feat than getting up. But although he was forced to risk his life several times, he was agile and clear-headed, and finally dropped to the path that led to the secret door of the passage.

His next thought was to mark the exact location of the place, so that he could find it again; and as he returned slowly along the paths through the rocky fissures he took mental note of every curve and communication, and believed he could now find his way to the retreat of the brigands at any time he chose.