

CHAPTER XXIV

PATSY'S NEW FRIEND

"I must say that I don't like the job," said Patsy, the next morning, as she stood by the window and faced Beth and Kenneth. "Suppose we fail?"

"In the bright lexicon of youth--"

"Shut up, Ken. If we fail," said Beth, "we will be no worse off than before."

"And if we win," added the boy, "they'll think twice before they try to rob Americans again."

"Well, I'm with you, anyhow," declared Patricia. "I can see it's risky, all right; but as you say, no great harm will be done if we slip up."

"You," announced Beth, gravely, "must be the captain."

"It isn't in me, dear. You figured the thing out, and Ken and I will follow your lead."

"No," said Beth, decidedly; "I'm not quick enough, either in thought or action, to be a leader, Patsy. And there's a bit of deception required

that I couldn't manage. That clever little thing, Tato, would know at once I was up to some mischief; but she would never suspect you."

"I like that compliment," replied Patricia. "I may deserve it, of course; but it strikes me Louise is the one best fitted for such work."

"We can't let Louise into this plot," said the boy, positively; "she'd spoil it all."

"Don't be silly, Patsy," said Beth. "You're genuine and frank, and the child likes you. I could see that yesterday. All you have to do is to be nice to her and win her confidence; and then, when the climax comes, you must be the spokesman and talk straight out from the shoulder. You can do that all right."

"I'll bet on her," cried Kenneth, with an admiring look at the girl.

"Then," said Patsy, "it is all arranged, and I'm the captain. And is it agreed that we won't lisp a word to Mr. Watson or Louise?"

"Not a word."

"Here," said Kenneth, drawing a revolver from his pocket, "is Uncle John's pop-gun. It's the only one I could find in his room, so he must have taken the other with him. Be careful of it, Patsy, for it's loaded all 'round. Can you shoot?"

"No; but I suppose the pistol can. I know enough to pull the trigger."

"And when you do, remember to point it away from your friends. Now hide it, my dear, and be careful of it."

Patsy concealed the weapon in the bosom of her dress, not without making a wry face and shivering a bit.

"Have you got your revolver, Beth?" asked the boy.

"Yes."

"And she can shoot just wonderfully!" exclaimed Patsy. "Yesterday she picked an orange off a tree with a bullet. You should have seen her."

"I know," said Ken, nodding. "I've seen Beth shoot before, and she's our main reliance in this conspiracy. For my part, I can hit a mark sometimes, and sometimes I can't. See here." He exhibited a beautiful pearl and silver-mounted weapon which he drew from his pocket. "Mr. Watson and I have carried revolvers ever since we came to Sicily, but we've never had occasion to use them. I can hardly believe, even now, that this beautiful place harbors brigands. It's such a romantic incident in our prosaic world of to-day. And now, young ladies, we are armed to the teeth and can defy an army. Eh, Captain Pat?"

"If you're not more respectful," said the girl, "I'll have you court-marshalled and drummed out of camp."

On the afternoon train came Louise and Mr. Watson from Messina. The American agents had responded promptly, and the bank had honored the orders and delivered the money without delay.

"It is all safe in my satchel," said the lawyer, as they rode together to the hotel; "and our dear friends are as good as rescued already. It's pretty bulky, Kenneth--four hundred thousand lira--but it is all in notes on the Banca d'Italia, for we couldn't manage gold."

"Quite a haul for the brigand," observed Kenneth, thoughtfully.

"True; but little enough for the lives of two men. That is the way I look at the transaction. And, since our friends can afford the loss, we must be as cheerful over the thing as possible. It might have been a tragedy, you know."

Louise shivered.

"I'm glad it is all over," she said, gratefully.

The conspirators looked at one another and smiled, but held their peace.

Arriving at the hotel, Beth and Kenneth at once disappeared, saying they

were going to town, as they would not be needed longer. Patsy accompanied their cousin and the lawyer to the sitting-room, where presently Tato came to them.

"Well, little one," said the lawyer, pleasantly, "We have secured the money required to enable Mr. Merrick to purchase the ring, and Mr.--er--Count Ferralti to buy his bracelet. Will you count it?"

"Yes, signore, if you please," replied Tato, with a sober face.

Mr. Watson drew out two packages of bank notes and placed them upon the table. The child, realizing the importance of the occasion, carefully counted each bundle, and then replaced the wrappers.

"The amounts are correct, signore," she said. "I thank you for making my task so easy. And now I will go."

The lawyer brought a newspaper and wrapped the money in it once again.

"It is always dangerous to carry so much money," said he; "but now no one will be likely to suspect the contents of your package."

Tato smiled.

"No one would care to molest me," she said; "for they fear those that protect me. Good afternoon, signore. Your friends will be with you in

time to dine in your company. Good afternoon, signorini," turning to Patsy and Louise.

"I'll walk a little way with you; may I?" asked Patsy, smiling into Tato's splendid eyes.

"To be sure, signorina," was the quick response.

Patricia caught up a sunshade and followed the child out at the side entrance, which was little used. Tato took the way along the old road, and Patsy walked beside her, chatting brightly of the catacombs, the Norman villa that showed its checkered tower above the trees and the ancient wall that still hemmed in the little village.

"I love Taormina," she said, earnestly, "and shall be sorry to leave it. You must be very happy, Tato, to be able to live here always."

"It is my birthplace," she said; "but I long to get away from it and see other countries. The view is fine, they say; but it tires me. The air is sweet and pure; but it oppresses me. The climate is glorious; but I have had enough of it. In other places there is novelty, and many things that Sicily knows nothing of."

"That is true," replied Patsy, tucking the little one's arm underneath her own, with a sympathetic gesture. "I know just how you feel, Tato. You must come to America some day, and visit me. I will make you very

welcome, dear, and you shall be my friend."

The child looked into her face earnestly.

"You do not hate me, signorina, because--because--"

"Because why?"

"Because my errand to you has been so lawless and--and--unfriendly?"

"Ah, Tato, you do not choose this life, do you?"

"No, signorina."

"It is forced on you by circumstances, is it not?"

"Truly, signorina."

"I know. You would not long so wistfully to change your condition if you enjoyed being a little brigand. But nothing that has passed must interfere with our friendship, dear. If I were in your place, you see, I would do just as you have done. It is not a very honest life, Tato, nor one to be proud of; but I'm not going to blame you one bit."

They had passed the Catania Gate and reached the foot of one of the mountain paths. Tato paused, hesitatingly.

"Oh, I'll go a little farther," said Patsy, promptly. "No one will notice two girls, you know. Shall I carry your parcel for a time?"

"No," replied the child, hugging it close with her disengaged arm. But she offered no objection when Patsy continued to walk by her side.

"Have you any brothers or sisters, Tato?"

"No, signorina."

"Have you a mother?"

"No, signorina. My father and I are alone."

"I know him well, Tato. We were on the ship together, crossing the ocean. He was gruff and disagreeable, but I made him talk to me and smile."

"I know; he has told me of the Signorina Patsy. He is fond of you."

"Yet he robbed my uncle."

The child flushed, and drew away her arm.

"That is it. That is why you should hate me," she replied, bitterly. "I

know it is robbery, and brigandage, although my father masks it by saying he sells antiques. Until now I have seen nothing wrong in this life, signorina; but you have made me ashamed."

"Why, dear?"

"Because you are so good and gentle, and so forgiving."

Patsy laughed.

"In reality, Tato, I am resentful and unforgiving. You will find out, soon, that I am a very human girl, and then I will not make you ashamed. But your father's business is shameful, nevertheless."

Tato was plainly puzzled, and knew not what to reply. But just then they reached the end of the crevasse, and the child said:

"You must return now, Signorina Patsy."

"But why cannot I go on with you, and come back with my uncle?"

Tato hesitated. Accustomed as she was to duplicity and acting, in her capacity as lure for her thieving father, the child was just now softened by Patsy's kindly manner and the successful accomplishment of her mission. She had no thought of any treachery or deception on the part of the American girl, and the request seemed to her natural

enough.

"If you like," she decided, "you may come as far as the barrier, and there wait for your uncle. It will not be long."

"Very well, dear."

Tato clambered over the dividing rock and dropped into the path beyond. Patsy sprang lightly after her. A short distance farther and they reached the barrier.

"This is the place, signorina. You will sit upon that stone, and wait until your uncle appears." She hesitated, and then added, softly: "I may not see you again. But you will not forget me?"

"Never, Tato. And if you come to America you must not forget to visit me. Remember, whatever happens, that we are friends, and must always remain so."

The child nodded, gratefully. Then, leaning against the face of the cliff, she raised her voice and warbled clearly the bit of song that served as the signal to her father.