

## CHAPTER XXVII

### TATO IS ADOPTED

They canvassed the subject of their future travels with considerable earnestness. Uncle John was bent upon getting to Rome and Venice, and from there to Paris, and the nieces were willing to go anywhere he preferred, as they were sure to enjoy every day of their trip in the old world. But Mr. Watson urged them strongly to visit Syracuse, since they were not likely to return to Sicily again and the most famous of all the ancient historic capitals was only a few hours' journey from Taormina. So it was finally decided to pass a week in Syracuse before returning to the continent, and preparations were at once begun for their departure.

Kenneth pleaded for one more day in which to finish his picture of Etna, and this was allowed him. Uncle John nevertheless confessed to being uneasy as long as they remained on the scene of his recent exciting experiences. Mr. Watson advised them all not to stray far from the hotel, as there was no certainty that Il Duca would not make another attempt to entrap them, or at least to be revenged for their escape from his clutches.

On the afternoon of the next day, however, they were startled by a call from the Duke in person. He was dressed in his usual faded velvet costume and came to them leading by the hand a beautiful little girl.

The nieces gazed at the child in astonishment.

Tato wore a gray cloth gown, ill-fitting and of coarse material; but no costume could destroy the fairy-like perfection of her form or the daintiness of her exquisite features. With downcast eyes and a troubled expression she stood modestly before them until Patsy caught her rapturously in her arms and covered her face with kisses.

"You lovely, lovely thing!" she cried. "I'm so glad to see you again, Tato darling!"

The Duke's stern features softened. He sighed heavily and accepted Uncle John's polite invitation to be seated.

The little party of Americans was fairly astounded by this unexpected visit. Kenneth regretted that he had left his revolver upstairs, but the others remembered that the brigand would not dare to molest them in the security of the hotel grounds, and were more curious than afraid.

Il Duca's hand was wrapped in a bandage, but the damaged finger did not seem to affect him seriously. Beth could not take her eyes off this dreadful evidence of her late conflict, and stared at it as if the bandage fascinated her.

"Signore," said the Duke, addressing Uncle John especially, "I owe to

you my apologies and my excuses for the annoyance I have caused to you and your friends. I have the explanation, if you will so kindly permit me."

"Fire away, Duke," was the response.

"Signore, I unfortunately come of a race of brigands. For centuries my family has been lawless and it was natural that by education I, too, should become a brigand. In my youth my father was killed in an affray and my mother took his place, seizing many prisoners and exacting from them ransom. My mother you have seen, and you know of her sudden madness and of her death. She was always mad, I think, and by nature a fiend. She urged my elder brother to wicked crimes, and when he rebelled she herself cast him, in a fit of anger, into the pit. I became duke in his place, and did my mother's bidding because I feared to oppose her. But for years I have longed to abandon the life and have done with crime.

"With me our race ends, for I have no sons. But my one child, whom you know as Tato, I love dearly. My greatest wish is to see her happy. The last few days have changed the fortunes of us both. The Duchessa is gone, and at last I am the master of my own fate. As for Tato, she has been charmed by the young American signorini, and longs to be like them. So we come to ask that you forgive the wrong we did you, and that you will now allow us to be your friends."

Uncle John was amazed.

"You have decided to reform, Duke?" he asked.

"Yes, signore. Not alone for Tato's sake, but because I loathe the life of brigandage. See; here is my thought. At once I will disband my men and send them away. My household effects I will sell, and then abandon the valley forever. Tato and I have some money, enough to live in quiet in some other land, where we shall be unknown."

"A very good idea, Duke."

"But from my respect for you, Signer Merreek, and from my daughter's love for your nieces--the brave and beautiful signorini--I shall dare to ask from you a favor. But already I am aware that we do not deserve it."

"What is it, sir?"

"That you take my Tato to keep for a few weeks, until I can send away my men and arrange my affairs here. It would be unpleasant for the child here, and with you she will be so happy. I would like the sweet signorini to buy nice dresses, like those they themselves wear, for my little girl, and to teach her the good manners she could not gain as the brigand's daughter. Tato has the money to pay for everything but the kindness, if you will let her stay in your society until I can claim her. I am aware that I ask too much; but the Signorina Patsy has said to my child that they would always be friends, whatever might happen, and

as I know you to be generous I have dared to come to you with this request. I only ask your friendship for my Tato, who is innocent. For myself, after I have become a good man, then perhaps you will forgive me, too."

Uncle John looked thoughtful; the old lawyer was grave and listened silently. Patsy, her arms still around the shrinking form of the child, looked pleadingly at her uncle. Beth's eyes were moist and Louise smiled encouragingly.

"Well, my dears? The Duke is certainly not entitled to our friendship, as he truly says; but I have nothing against little Tato. What do you advise?"

"Let us keep her, and dress her like the beautiful doll she is, and love her!" cried Patsy.

"She shall be our adopted cousin," said Louise.

"Tato is good stuff!" declared Kenneth.

"Well, Beth?"

"It seems to me, Uncle," said the girl, seriously, "that if the Duke really wishes to reform, we should give him a helping hand. The little girl has led a bad life only because her father forced her to lure his

victims and then procure the money for their ransoms; but I am sure her nature is sweet and pure, and she is so young that she will soon forget the evil things she has learned. So I vote with my cousins. Let us adopt Tato, and care for her until her father can introduce her into a new and more proper life."

"Well argued, Beth," said Uncle John, approvingly. "I couldn't have put the case better myself. What do you say, Silas Watson?"

"That you are all quite right," answered the old lawyer. "And the best part of the whole thing, to me, is the fact that this nest of brigands will be wiped out of existence, and Taormina be hereafter as safe for tourists as old Elmhurst itself. I wish I could say as much for the rest of Sicily."

Uncle John extended his hand to the Duke, who took it gratefully, although with a shamefaced expression that was perhaps natural under the circumstances.

"Look up, dear," said Patsy to the girl, softly; "look up and kiss me. You've been adopted, Tato! Are you glad?"