

'But there is danger and suffering on the land, Annunziata.'

'I know,' she assented gravely. 'Only—the sea is cruel, he is hungry—always.'

I left her, promising to see my namesake very soon. Such a cheerless day! I half made up my mind to leave it, to go inside and devote myself to letter-writing. Then I remembered my wide window looking over the grey sea. I was in no mood for such companionship, so I kept on, past the shabby houses with their high steps, not minding where I went, only keeping my eyes fixed on the white-capped mountains.

The storm clouds had scattered before I turned my back to the hills, and when I reached home Giuseppe was standing in the doorway, his bronze-brown eyes twinkling merrily from under his wild thatch of hair.

'The Signora has a visitor,' he announced with much ceremony.

'And it is——?' I inquired carelessly.

'Alessandro, Signora. He said he would wait for the Signora's return.'

I found big Alessandro standing before my window, looking strangely out of place in my low-walled room. He saluted me courteously—these peasants' manners put mine to shame, and after two years' absence the contrast was all the greater.

'The Signora can see far,' he remarked after he was seated. 'Almost as far as C——.' He named the land that lay below the horizon.

I laughed. 'Yes; is it not wonderful? You like it, Alessandro?'

'Yes, Signora; and yet——' he paused and looked at me as if in doubt.

'What is it?' I asked.

'It is as the Signora says—wonderful out there—it is so near; while in here——' He glanced around. 'I feel caged—trapped. To have it so near and yet—not to be on it. I could not bear it, Signora. It is calling me. It does not call the Signora?'

'Sometimes,' I answered. 'I am not a sailor like you, Alessandro. I am neither brave nor skilled on the sea. I am afraid of it, yet I love it, and this is the only way I can have it.' I pointed to my wide window. He nodded, apparently understanding my whim.

A glowing, flaming sunset was tinting the water and lighting up the few sails that were lazily drifting before the breeze. The old sea-wall, with the nets drying on it and the waves lapping idly at the foot, seemed part of creation, so blended was it with the earth color around. A couple of fishermen with baskets of vivid-tinted fish came up the beach, a group of sun-tanned, shouting children following every step. From my point of vantage we gazed at the joyous life, somewhat in the manner of Olympian deities amused by these mortals of a little day, whose intense, beauty-loving nature was ever a source of joy. Nothing morbid, nothing unclean ever came near to this little sea town.

Alessandro was laughing heartily at the bare-legged children hopping around the well-filled baskets.

'Little pests, Signora, they could well be called. Look at Nicola, small imp that he is. The Signora knows he is too old to play all day.' Alessandro muttered something under his breath that my quick ears failed to catch. Rising rapidly to his feet, an inscrutable look in his velvet brown eyes, he bade me a courteous farewell, praying me to remember that always, always his boat was at my disposal. I told him truthfully that I was looking forward with great pleasure to many days spent on the sea with him for boatman. A red tint that the compliment called to his cheek showed beneath the brown. A final bow and he was gone.

It was some days before I could claim the promised boat. The day was golden warm, with a blaze of sunshine, when I stood on the beach watching for Alessandro. He soon came, and close at his heels was Nicola, the dancing, shouting Nicola, whom only a few days ago he had so indignantly dubbed 'an imp, a pest.' The imp stood, silent enough now, all suspense—with bated breath—while Alessandro asked my permission to take him with us. His eyes, that I knew could hold so much mischief, looked solemnly into mine, his brown, naked toes digging into and grasping the sand. The permission was given, and with a shout of joy he made off in the direction of the boat. I looked inquiringly at Alessandro.

'The Signora is too good,' he protested. 'She should not be worried with such wickedness. Nicola is wild, but he has made me promises. He has no one to mind.'

'Why has he no one?' I asked. 'Maddalena was always a good mother.'

'The best—the very best!' he added. 'Only she is young and alone.'

'Alone!' I laughed at the notion. 'With that youngster?'

'She needs some one to help her.' He looked at me in all seriousness, as if to chide me for laughing.

We were soon cutting rapidly through the clear water, the boat careening under the big sail.

The gorgeous splendor of the sunset was before us when we turned homeward, and when the little town came in sight it was glowing with the reflected glories of the flaming sun. Maddalena was watching for us from the sea-wall; Alessandro greeted her with a loud, ringing call and a glad toss of his scarlet cap; Nicola tried a feeble imitation, and nearly lost himself overboard.

'He is safe, thanks to Alessandro,' I called as I jumped from the boat and climbed the stone steps to where Maddalena stood. She seemed absurdly young to be the mother of the sturdy little ragamuffin that capered beside me.

'You should have been with us, Maddalena; the day was beautiful and Alessandro's boat went as easily as a seagull.'

'The Signora knows I have work to do,' she answered. 'I cannot spare so many hours; besides, I care not to be on the sea, only to look at it when the sun shines. Has Nicola been a wicked boy?'

I assured her nothing could have been more lamb-like than Nicola's behaviour, owing, I promptly added, to his regard for Alessandro.

'Ah, he is always good with him,' she sighed. 'I try—but he will not mind me. We are good comrades, we play games together; but when I try to discipline him—he runs away.'

'Alessandro,' I said, as he ran quickly up the steps, 'Maddalena says she wishes she could make Nicola mind like you do. She wants to know how you manage it. Will you——?'

'Ah, Signora! Never, never did I say that,' she cried. I stopped, astonished at the emphatic denial. Alessandro, looking like a convicted criminal, stood twisting his cap, the red that mounted to his cheeks vying with Maddalena's 'kerchief.' I glanced from one to the other. Alessandro finally broke the uncomfortable silence.

'I will tell, if Maddalena wishes.' But Maddalena shook her head with great energy, and raised a pair of beseeching eyes to Alessandro.

'You are both certainly very foolish,' I continued. 'There can be no reason why I should not be told. Nicola is a very bad boy—sometimes, and if Alessandro knows——'

'No, no, Signora; Nicola is not bad, he is never bad, not like——' She would have named a dozen imps had I not interrupted.

'It is as you please, Maddalena. The Signora is tired.' I broke in rather ungraciously. 'I will say good-night.'

'Adieu!' I called back, standing a moment to watch the three as they moved off. Nicola waving frantic good-byes from his high perch on Alessandro's shoulders, and Maddalena, laughing merrily at the happy nonsense of the two.

Giuseppe—I was sitting at supper, the antique lamp giving little light beyond the white cover—the sea was more beautiful to-day than I have ever seen it. It was glorious. We went on—on, as if there was no ending; then home, straight home—into the golden sunset.

'The Signora should have been a fisherman,' he replied; which matter-of-fact speech brought me down from my airy flight.

'Never, Giuseppe, never!' I cried, with more energy than the situation demanded. 'I hate killing things, and I'm afraid of the water.'

'The Signora need not fear,' he replied soothingly. 'She can never be a fisherman.'

'Giuseppe, why has Maddalena so much trouble with Nicola?' The old man stopped in his serving and stared at me. The change in the conversation had been too swift for his slow-working mind.

'Is Nicola a very wicked boy, Giuseppe?' I asked, putting the question in a simpler form.

'Not wicked at all, Signora, only mischievous.'

'Then, why—returning resolutely to my first proposition—does Maddalena have so much trouble with him?'

'Maddalena is young, she yields to all his demands too much; she is wrong.'