'Giuseppe,' I said, in a coaxing voice, 'this salad and wine are too good to be enjoyed alone. Take that chair and this,' I filled a glass and held it towards him. Protesting feebly, he did as I bade him. 'Now, tell me all about Maddalena.'

'There is nothing to tell. The Signora knows she married very young. Her husband was a brave man and a good fisherman. One October day he was drowned, and she was left with the child.'

'She loved him?' I asked.

'She adores him still,' he answered. 'Poor Matteo was a good man, but not handsome. The Signora must remember him—a short, broad man, with small eyes and red cheeks, and hands—hands like that,' he cut a swift circle in the air with one finger.

'And Maddalena is so beautiful,' I murmured, a picture of the departed Matteo rising before my eyes. 'And Alessandro,' I went on meditatively, 'why should the boy mind him—what does he do?'

Giuseppe drained the last drops in his glass, put it down on the table, pushed back his chair, and stood up. 'The Signora must know,' he answered.

The Signora did not know, and for all her adroit questioning was not going to know; so, with a few more words, I left my host and climbed the narrow stairs.

One of the great feasts of our Lady was near, and the town was fairly seething with excitement. It was the most important festa of the whole year. The church was dressed in the gayest and stiffest of paper flowers, green boughs stuck everywhere, the tallest tapers only were used to light the altar. At the head of the procession our Lady's statue was to be carried, gowned in gorgeous clothes and covered with a lace veil, the work of her loving children. The stiff, overdressed little figure, that to my critical Northern eyes seemed but a travesty, was to their loving Southern hearts and vivid imaginations almost a living memorial of their Blessed Mother.

I donned a white dress, and instead of my sombre black ribbons tied on our Lady's own color, in honor of her festa, as a token that, for once, I would forget I was a calculating, critical American, and become forthwith a gay, glad-hearted child of Italy, prepared to walk beside her image with a fervent prayer, and—if necessary—to dance merrily with a light heart. So did my simple blue ribbons become symbolic. I ignored Giuseppe's astonished stare at my unusual adornment.

Annunziata, with my namesake comfortably asleep in the bend of her arm, walked home with me after Mass to my studio.

The baby of many names had become familiar with every nook of my small domicile, and often risked his precious person many times a day by sucking my brushes, licking paints, or bedaubing his little face with indiscriminate colors. Annunziata and I became so occupied in sudden, life-saving onslaughts that we could think of little else.

'Annunziata,' I began, 'do you not consider children a great care?'

'No, Signora,' Annunziata answered instantly. 'Speranza is not a care; he is a pleasure, a joy.'

'That is just the way,' I replied dryly. 'He is a play-toy now—a doll that you dress——'

'And love, the mother added wisely, wondering, I am sure, what was coming next.

'Yes, and love,' I amended. 'Then when they grow big they run wild, pay no heed to your wishes.'

'Why is the Signora thinking such thoughts?' Annunziata asked me soberly, looking at the wee man on the floor.

'My thoughts are with Maddalena, for I remember when Nicola was as he is,' I answered, pointing to the baby on the floor. 'There is nothing talked of in the town but Nicola's pranks and the trouble he gives Maddalena.'

Annunziata looked at me, with an expression in her big black eyes that I did not understand.

'Well?' I inquired.

'If the Signora does not know——' This was too much.

'No, I do not know,' I answered very decidedly. 'But you are going to tell me.'

'It is no mystery,' Annunziata began. 'The whole town knows it. Alessandro wants to marry Maddalena—ever since the last festa, a year ago—and she will not have him. She thinks, and I do also, Signora, that marrying twice is not right. We all think so,' she added, with a tone of grave decision in her voice, as of one who sat in judgment.

'That is why he cares so for Nicola!'

'It is the short way to the mother's heart.'

'And Maddalena?' I asked.

She shrugged her shapely shoulders. 'Second marriages are wrong,' she maintained doggedly, merciless as happy people can be. 'We have told her.' Again the official tone, the red lips set firmly together, the narrow brows nearly meeting in a disapproving frown.

'You mean that you went to her and told her she must not marry Alessandro?' I questioned.

'Not—"must not"—Signora,' she corrected, 'only better not. She agreed, after a few tears. We told her that in the memory even of Giuseppe there had been no one wedded twice.'

'Suppose——' I suggested, after we had talked some time. 'Suppose she cares for him as you care for Marco?'

'Impossible,' she answered quickly.

'May be so,' I replied carelessly, hoping she might remember the unhappiness of her own courtship, and have mercy. 'That true love seldom runs smooth is as old—as old as—Italy,' I finished. 'Speranza mia'—stooping to pick up my ridiculous namesake—'tell your mother—some day—to remember how desolate her heart was when she stood on the shore and watched a tiny boat, with two men in it, tossed about by the mad fury of the sea.' I longed to add to the mother—'that all your unhappiness came from foolish, narrow prejudice, because in the memory of man a Galdi had never wed any but seamen, and Marco, to whom you gave your heart, was a follower of the gentle craft, a son of St. Crispin.'

I think from all the stories I heard that Nicola's guardian angel must have had a busy time. I almost doubted some of the pranks, when I thought of the small figure I had seen at the festa, walking beside our Lady's statue, holding the lighted candle bravely aloft—though his arms must have ached with the heavy burden. From the seraphic expression of his face one might have thought he was absorbed in prayer. Maddalena had pointed him out to me with triumphant pride.

'The Signora sees for herself,' she whispered. 'He is an angel; I am indeed fortunate. Yet they would make me believe he is wicked.'

I assented faintly, doubt in my heart. Had I not seen him, on his way to church, give Angelo a ducking in the fountain, tripping him up skilfully, in all his gay festa attire, as he was running past, and disappearing still more skilfully before the victim's screams brought his mother, who gave him a sound spanking.

Some days after I met Maddalena, looking as if all the cares of the universe had settled on her shoulders.

'Had I seen Nicola?' I shook my head. She had heard about Angelo, she told me. 'And on the festa'—the tears rolled unchecked down the smooth olive cheek. Nicola had been severely chastised and forbidden to leave the house. I think, from Maddalena's vivid description and the tears that fell during the recital, that it was the first punishment—the very first—she had ever inflicted on her offspring in the whole course of his seven years. Being absolutely unprecedented, he had resented it bitterly, and Maddalena's voice choked with sobs as she told me that he had run away, and she could not find him. What could she do? Where could she look for him? She knew he had gone to join the brigands.

The idea of Nicola trudging off on his fat brown legs to join the brigands was amusing. I consoled the disconsolate mother as best I could, begging her not to worry, that he would come home when he was hungry, which I felt sure would be soon.

The town was a small one, and before sunset every nook and cranny had been searched for the runaway, but no trace was found. Maddalena, dry-eyed now and desperate, sat at home and refused to be comforted. The boats were all in, all but Alessandro's; he had sailed for a port farther south, and would be gone for twenty-four hours.

The next day, boats and fishing neglected, with only a few hours' sleep, the men started out again; a single thought possessed the town—to find Nicola, imp though he was, and to see the sorrow leave Maddalena's eyes.

(To be concluded.)