

"Birbante, Signorina ?"

"Yes. Are you from Naples ?"

"I come from Mergellina, Signorina."

Vere looked at him half doubtfully, but still with innocent admiration. There was something perfectly fearless and capable about him that attracted her.

He rowed in to shore.

"How old are you ?" she asked.

"Sixteen years old, Signorina."

"I am sixteen, too."

They reached the islet, and Vere got out. The boy followed her, fastened the boat, and moved away a few steps. She wondered why, till she saw him stop in a sun patch and let the beams fall full upon him.

"You aren't afraid of catching cold ?" she asked.

He threw up his chin. His eyes went to the cigarettes.

"Yes," said Vere, in answer to the look, "you shall have one. Here !"

She held out the packet. Very carefully and neatly the boy, after holding his right hand for a moment to the sun to get dry, drew out a cigarette.

"Oh, you want a match !"

He sprang away and ran lightly to the boat. Without waking his companions he found a matchbox and lit the cigarette. Then he came back, on the way stopping to get into his jersey.

Vere sat down on a narrow seat let into the rock close to the sun-patch. She was nursing the dolce on her knee.

"You won't have it ?" she asked.

He gave her his usual negative, again stepping full into the sun.

"Well, then, I shall eat it. You say a dolce is for women !"

"Si, Signorina," he answered, quite seriously.

She began to devour it slowly, while the boy drew the cigarette smoke into his lungs voluptuously.

"And you are only sixteen ?" she asked.

"Si, Signorina."

"As young as I am ! But you look almost a man."

"Signorina, I have always worked. I am a man."

He squared his shoulders. She liked the determination, the resolution in his face ; and she liked the face too. He was a very handsome boy, she thought, but somehow he did not look quite Neapolitan. His eyes lacked the round and staring impudence characteristic of many Neapolitans she had seen. There was something at times impassive in their gaze. In shape they were long, and slightly depressed at the corners by the cheeks, and they had full, almost heavy, lids. The features of the boy were small and straight, and gave no promise