

lovely season in Italy when the fierce heats of summer merge into the balmy mildness of early autumn, two girls stood at the door of this cottage. One, an ill-made, dwarfish figure, with dull and vacant features, was spinning with a hand-spindle, or distaff; the other, a beautiful girl of fifteen or sixteen, tall and graceful, and with an expression of the most vivid intelligence lighting up her face, held a pitcher of milk, which she had just taken from some goats that were browsing near.

"Take it into the house, Ninetta *mia*," she said, giving the pitcher to the spinner, "and be sure you give the *madre* a cupful while it is warm. I must go and try if there is anything in the nets."

"Yes, yes, Carmina," said the spinner, with alacrity, but in a weak, childish voice; and, taking the pitcher, she went into the cottage.

A stranger unaccustomed to mountain paths would not have found that which led from the cottage to the sea either safe or pleasant, but Carmina had been used to it all her life, and was as active and sure-footed as a young kid. It was quite as safe and easy to her as any level road could have been and she ran quickly down, singing, in a clear melodious voice, one of those wild, thrilling airs with which the Pifferari attract admiring crowds in the streets of Naples or Rome. She was soon beside the little basin in which the skiff lay. Casting loose the fastening, she jumped in, and, taking up the paddle and pushing it against the rocks, first at one side and then at the other, she quickly got her skiff through the narrow entrance and out into the bay.

Any vessel much larger than Carmina's little skiff was prevented from entering this bay by a barrier of sunken rocks, which extended nearly all the way across its mouth, and towards the centre of the reef raised their great heads above the water, too scattered and unconnected a group to be called an island, but large enough for many shrubs and plants to find root and nourishment in their

crevices. They were not much more than a hundred yards from the land, and it was to this point that Carmina directed her skiff. Guiding it among them till she reached the first of the little fishing nets set in the narrow channel, she was stooping over it, when the sudden fall of a fragment of stone close beside made her start and look up.

Leaning over the rock just above her, so close that she could have touched him with her paddle, she saw the head and shoulders of a man. A very handsome head it was, too—a broad, square brow, shaded with dark curling hair, dark, brilliant eyes, a straight well-formed nose, a jaw somewhat square, perhaps, but a singularly handsome mouth, not at all disfigured by his well-trimmed, black moustache. It was a face that could look stern enough on occasions, no doubt, but now it was gentle and smiling, and though she was startled and surprised, Carmina did not feel much frightened.

"Do not fear me, *cara mia*," said the stranger, gently, "I would not harm you for the world."

He had one of those exquisite voices which penetrate the heart like a strain of rich music, and its tones confirmed his words, as much as the frank and pleasant expression of his handsome face.

"I am not afraid, signor," said Carmina.

"But you wonder how I came here, do you not?—Well, I will tell you. I was passing these rocks in a boat with two other men, and I took it into my head to jump out and scramble upon them. Would you believe it, they sailed off and left me?"

"It is some joke," said Carmina, "they will come back again for the signor."

"I am afraid not," said the stranger; "I was wet enough when I got on the rocks, and now my clothes are quite dry, so you see I must have been a long time here."

"But why should they treat the signor so badly?" said Carmina.

"Perhaps they could not help it," said the stranger, gravely.