

## *A Tuscan Melody*

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MELODY*

SEVEN hundred years ago, when the heart of Italy was glowing from a new fire and strong with a new youth, a poet of whom little is known parted from his lady in a Tuscan orange grove. The fading blue of the sky above them, and the green and bright colour of the orange trees dim in the sudden twilight, made a sweetly toned background to her small delicately shaped Italian head, and greatly pleased the poet. Those were caressing words that he whispered as they waited in the dusk. They parted, she to thread her way down to the village, he upwards to the little house above the orange trees. Her round lips pouted as she slipped away. "He does not love me. No, he does not love me," their petulant little curves seemed to whisper to each other. Yet, when his hand was on his doorlatch, he stood for many minutes looking down to where her white dress flickered through the trees. Looking at him then, one would have said he loved her. But suddenly a sweeter smile moved his face, a brighter light lit his eyes. He looked like one before whom the beauty of the earth has dawned in a glowing cloud on a pale sky. He disappeared into the house and was soon striding up and down a brown wood room, bare with scanty furniture. Words were singing in his ears. His heart throbbed to a strangely beautiful measure. Now and again he took a long pen from a small table in a corner of the room, and wrote words upon a piece of parchment. Then he would cross them out and write the words again. His face shone like the lanthorn of pale glass that hung in the corner over the table. Looking upon him then, one would have said that all the love of all his life was held in the faint thing that he was snatching from the air and setting out in trembling loving strokes upon his scrap of vellum.

All night he worked, building up a song from live words, and fitting them with all the art that was in him to a fine old Tuscan melody. As the orange trees broke into brilliance under the morning sun, his song was finished and he rested for a moment, humming it happily over to himself. Then, drunk with the joy of having made a new thing, he ran down the hill to bring Valeria, his lady, who had the sweetest voice in all the valley, that she might be the first to sing the song that he had made. Then indeed was he in love. Whether with the sparkling song, each word of which seemed like a little mesh in the net of music that held his

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soul, a panting, trembling captive, or with the thought of the dainty Lady Valeria singing it over in the house above the orange trees, it is impossible to say. He found Valeria, and brought her all untidy and fresh as the dew on the grass, at tumbling pace up through the trees. They climbed hand in hand. His hand held hers so tight that the blood that beat in him seemed to her to belong to her own veins also. "Surely he loves me," she thought. Even as they ran he kept telling her the words of the song, lilting over the melody she was to sing. They reached the house, and he took a long draught of wine, holding it up for her to see the sunlight sparkling in its crimson depths. She refused when he offered it, but he made her sip a little that her song might rise the sweeter.

She sang, and the poet turned his head aside, gazing dumbly out over the valley, and a mist was in his eyes. The beauty of Valeria bringing the other beauty from the heart of his own song was like the bright lightning that stuns everything to silent thought. As she neared the end of the song he turned again towards her. And when she stopped with a little sob in her voice, he caught her in his arms. She sang it for him again and again. He knew as she sang that he loved her. Shortly they were married. This is the end of the story of Valeria and her poet, but the tale of the song is not finished yet, nor ever will be while men love to hear their women singing.

For the little wild thing that was born to the poet in that mad happy night in the house above the orange grove has been sung through all the world so long and so often that the name of the poet has been forgotten. The peasants in the valley call it Valeria's song, for when she came down into the village it was ever on her lips. They loved the music and the words, and passed them on from mouth to mouth long after the poet and Valeria lay together under the grass with the orange trees blossoming above their grave. The poem was sung nightly in the hot Italian summers when the peasants sat together after sunset, watching the reds and greens of the sky darken to purple and deep blue. Petrarch heard it sung in his Tuscan childhood, and he wrote other words to fit the music, but the old words clung on, and may still be heard in the valley where they were written.

The song might always have remained here as one of the

old songs of the place, and never been known elsewhere, if it had not been for a fortunate accident. One year when the valley was not so prosperous as to promise employment for all its young men, a youth, one of a numerous family, determined to leave his home and hack a golden fortune from the wealth of Pisa. This youth was clever in the making of little statues and his voice was clear and fresh. He came to Pisa, and as he had not money to rent a booth, he placed his figures on a tray and carried them through the streets. Friendless among the quick contemptuous dwellers in the city, he was puzzled and not a little dismayed by the finely dressed youths who swaggered past him, and the quaint dresses of the sailing folk who came from all parts of the world. He was very lonely. To lift his soul which felt bruised and beaten by the buzz around him, he sang as he walked, the old song of the valley he had left, away in the Tuscan hills. As he sang, he forgot the people and all the hum of the chattering trading city. He thought of the big tree in the middle of his village, in whose boughs he had sat and teasingly flung leaves and twigs at a dark-haired girl who stood gazing up at him. Perhaps he thought a little of her also. However that may be he did not notice a tall Pisan who stopped to listen to him, so that he started quickly when the man laid a hand on the curling black hair that covered his bare head. "Youth," said he, "you must sing that song before my master. Whence came it? Who was its author?" The lad was accustomed to speak freely, and undismayed by the dignity of his listener, who was a man finely dressed, he told what little he knew of the origin of the poem. He was taken to a great house richly furnished, and sang the song before one of the greatest nobles of the city. He listened to the song, and it brought a wistful look of a man rather than of a statesman, to his care-laden eyes. He had the song over again and often afterwards, and it was spread through all Pisa. From Pisa it was carried to all the cities of Italy by travellers or by the accidents of war. The Venetians knew it. It became a common street song in Rome and Naples, and often on cool nights in Florence youths and maidens drifting in silent boats between the banks of the Arno, heard music in the houses that they passed, and this song with its ancient Tuscan melody floated to them over the water in the beam of light from one of the open windows.

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From Venice it found its way northward into the rugged heart of Germany. The old strong life still throbbed in the pulses of the North, when an engraver in wood came over the hills to the city on the sea. His manners were rough, of the north, but his face was free and open, and he soon became a favourite among the artists of Venice. One, in particular, grew very close with him, and the two worked in the same room. Now this artist was painting a picture for a rich man, and a noble Venetian lady, who loved him, was sitting as a model. She was fond of singing, and among all the songs she knew, this Tuscan song was her favourite. Once, as they were preparing their painting tools, she sang it to beguile the time. The tune and its words seized the German artist and held him fast. Though there was nothing sorrowful in the lyric, yet it moved him as it had moved the man who wrote it, and his sight was dimmed with tears. He begged her for the words, and found a strange joy in the swaying rhythms of the Latin that she taught him, half laughing at his eagerness. Then when he returned to the north he chanted the song at one of the merry feasts where soldiers and artists, priests and poets sat together heartily at a single board. He sang it hesitatingly as one exhibits a new sword which looks handsome but has given no proof of its strength. Under his broad eyebrows he looked round for the applause he expected and won. The others asked him for the words. Twice he repeated them. Then, with clash of flags on the table, the whole company of men in lusty chorus chanted the ancient song until the rafters creaked.

Already the song had filled all Italy and been carried across the seas to the East and across the hills to the North, when hundreds of years after that first singing in the orange grove among the Tuscan hills, travelling singers carried it West, to the Dutch fishermen who chanted it as they brought their boats to beach, to the roystering taverns of old France, and in many varying versions to Norway, and the unknown lands beyond. About this time, when all the world was singing, when lovers sang beneath the windows of their loves, and peace and war alike filled men with song, the melody came curiously to England. A pious English pilgrim, with a little of the devil still in him that he wished to cast out by his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, was tramping across Europe, singing as he went psalm tunes and all manner of godly

chants. One day in southern Germany, as he passed under the windows of an old brown inn, a voice started into the air directly above him. His pious meditation was so strong upon him that he was decidedly startled, but all thoughts of angels or devils were flung from his mind, when, looking up, he saw a red-cheeked German maiden leaning from a window-sill, singing heartfully this same old Tuscan song. Pilgrim though he was, he tucked up his skirts, dropped his staff and scrip, and in two bars of the song was up the wooden stairs and laughingly pursuing that German maiden round and round a table. He caught her at last, of course, and she sang the song to him very sweetly, sitting before him on the table, swinging her wooden shoes. He vowed that he would sing it himself, and it is recorded that he entered the Holy City with the wild thrill of the Tuscan melody upon his pious lips. When he returned to England his song spread far among the learned, and soon descended to the unlearned, who sang it quite as lustily. As years passed, it became most popular, and the chubby little boys who sat cross-legged on imitation dolphins sang it to Queen Elizabeth at that famous revel in the grounds of Kenilworth Castle. She was pleased with its melody, and had a copy writ on vellum in inks of red and green, with much fine gold, and caused her pages to sing it to her when she rested in a balcony of Windsor, weary and tired from her day of careful scheming.

For the next two hundred years the song was sung through all Europe, by the students of the universities, by soldiers on the march, by merry-making priests; the light-haired girls of Germany and the dark-haired ladies of Spain sang it always with the same subtle enjoyment, bringing gaiety to some and tears to others. But of all the stories of its singing that we know, there is none I like so well as this, of eighteenth century France. A dainty demoiselle, given the words by a stiff old singing master, read them and found them sweet to her careful little tongue. She stood by the greyheaded man at the instrument, and her slender throat swelled up and down with the wavelets of the song. She sang it as it should be sung, with the fresh passion and clear voice of a young girl, and the old master bent his locks over her little hands and kissed them for her singing. Then she blushed prettily and would sing no more till, coaxed by the pleading courteous old gentleman, she burst out laughingly with one of the

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lilting songs of the France that has long been dead except in the souls of her poets.

Lastly, to prove that all this is true, was not the old song sung to me to-night, when dusk caressed my orchard. Two girls, who looked like spirits in their pale dresses against the darkness of the trees, sang to me leaning on a bough whose faint pink blossoms still showed dim in the twilight. Only an hour ago, when I passed into my cottage, the stars sang high in the heavens above me and the echoes of those two sweet girlish voices were clinging round my heart.

Besides these, the song, and the melody which is older than the song, have had many other adventures. They have been woven into operas, and sung in brilliant theatres and cold glimmering streets, in crowded cities and on the wide expanses of the East. Some day I mean to build the stories of the singings into a little book.

ARTHUR RANSOME