

CHAPTER IV

SOME NEW ACQUAINTANCES, AND A WARNING

For an inexperienced tourist Uncle John managed their arrangements most admirably. He knew nothing at all about ocean travel or what was the proper method to secure comfortable accommodations; but while most of the passengers were writing hurried letters in the second deck gallery, which were to be sent back by the pilot, Mr. Merrick took occasion to interview the chief steward and the deck steward and whatever other official he could find, and purchased their good will so liberally that the effect of his astute diplomacy was immediately apparent.

His nieces found that the sunniest deck chairs bore their names; the most desirable seats in the dining hall were theirs when, half famished because breakfast had been disregarded, they trooped in to luncheon; the best waiters on the ship attended to their wants, and afterward their cabins were found to be cosily arranged with every comfort the heart of maid could wish for.

At luncheon it was found that the steward had placed a letter before Uncle John's plate. The handwriting of the address Louise, who sat next her uncle, at once recognized as that of her mother; but she said nothing.

Mr. Merrick was amazed at the contents of the communication, especially as he had so recently parted with the lady who had written it.

It said: "I must warn you, John, that my daughter has just escaped a serious entanglement, and I am therefore more grateful than I can express that you are taking her far from home for a few weeks. A young man named Arthur Weldon--a son of the big railroad president, you know--has been paying Louise marked attentions lately; but I cautioned her not to encourage him because a rumor had reached me that he has quarrelled with his father and been disinherited. My informant also asserted that the young man is wild and headstrong and cannot be controlled by his parent; but he always seemed gentlemanly enough at our house, and my greatest objection to him is that he is not likely to inherit a dollar of his father's money. Louise and I decided to keep him dangling until we could learn the truth of this matter, for you can easily understand that with her exceptional attractions there is no object in Louise throwing herself away upon a poor man, or one who cannot give her a prominent position in society. Imagine my horror, John, when I discovered last evening that my only child, whom I have so fondly cherished, has ungratefully deceived me. Carried away by the impetuous avowals of this young scapegrace, whom his own father disowns, she has confessed her love for him--love for a pauper!--and only by the most stringent exercise of my authority have I been able to exact from Louise a promise that she will not become formally engaged to Arthur Weldon, or even correspond with him, until she has returned home. By that time I shall have learned more of his history and prospects, when I

can better decide whether to allow the affair to go on. Of course I have hopes that in case my fears are proven to have been well founded, I can arouse Louise to a proper spirit and induce her to throw the fellow over. Meantime, I implore you, as my daughter's temporary guardian, not to allow Louise to speak of or dwell upon this young man, but try to interest her in other gentlemen whom you may meet and lead her to forget, if possible, her miserable entanglement. Consider a loving mother's feelings, John. Try to help me in this emergency, and I shall be forever deeply grateful."

"It's from mother, isn't it?" asked Louise, when he had finished reading the letter.

"Yes," he answered gruffly, as he crumpled the missive and stuffed it into his pocket.

"What does she say, Uncle?"

"Nothing but rubbish and nonsense. Eat your soup, my dear; it's getting cold."

The girl's sweet, low laughter sounded very pleasant, and served to calm his irritation. From her demure yet amused expression Uncle John guessed that Louise knew the tenor of her mother's letter as well as if she had read it over his shoulder, and it comforted him that she could take the matter so lightly. Perhaps the poor child was not so deeply in love as

her mother had declared.

He was greatly annoyed at the confidence Mrs. Merrick had seen fit to repose in him, and felt she had no right to burden him with any knowledge of such an absurd condition of affairs just as he was starting for a holiday. Whatever might be the truth of the girl's "entanglement,"--and he judged that it was not all conveyed in Martha Merrick's subtle letter--Louise would surely be free and unhampered by either love or maternal diplomacy for some time to come. When she returned home her mother might conduct the affair to suit herself. He would have nothing to do with it in any way.

As soon as luncheon was finished they rushed for the deck, and you may imagine that chubby little Uncle John, with his rosy, smiling face and kindly eyes, surrounded by three eager and attractive girls of from fifteen to seventeen years of age, was a sight to compel the attention of every passenger aboard the ship.

It was found easy to make the acquaintance of the interesting group, and many took advantage of that fact; for Uncle John chatted brightly with every man and Patsy required no excuse of a formal introduction to confide to every woman that John Merrick was taking his three nieces to Europe to "see the sights and have the time of their lives."

Many of the business men knew well the millionaire's name, and accorded him great respect because he was so enormously wealthy and successful.

But the little man was so genuinely human and unaffected and so openly scorned all toadyism that they soon forgot his greatness in the financial world and accepted him simply as a good fellow and an invariably cheerful comrade.

The weather was somewhat rough for the latter part of March--they had sailed the twenty-seventh--but the "Irene" was so staunch and rode the waves so gracefully that none of the party except Louise was at all affected by the motion. The eldest cousin, however, claimed to be indisposed for the first few days out, and so Beth and Patsy and Uncle John sat in a row in their steamer chairs, with the rugs tucked up to their waists, and kept themselves and everyone around them merry and light hearted.

Next to Patsy reclined a dark complexioned man of about thirty-five, with a long, thin face and intensely black, grave eyes. He was carelessly dressed and wore a flannel shirt, but there was an odd look of mingled refinement and barbarity about him that arrested the girl's attention. He sat very quietly in his chair, reserved both in speech and in manner; but when she forced him to talk he spoke impetuously and with almost savage emphasis, in a broken dialect that amused her immensely.

"You can't be American," she said.

"I am Sicilian," was the proud answer.

"That's what I thought; Sicilian or Italian or Spanish; but I'm glad it's Sicilian, which is the same as Italian. I can't speak your lingo myself," she continued, "although I am studying it hard; but you manage the English pretty well, so we shall get along famously together."

He did not answer for a moment, but searched her unconscious face with his keen eyes. Then he demanded, brusquely:

"Where do you go?"

"Why, to Europe," she replied, as if surprised.

"Europe? Pah! It is no answer at all," he responded, angrily. "Europe is big. To what part do you journey?"

Patsy hesitated. The magic word "Europe" had seemed to sum up their destination very effectively, and she had heretofore accepted it as sufficient, for the time being, at least. Uncle John had bought an armful of guide books and Baedekers, but in the hurry of departure she had never glanced inside them. To go to Europe had been enough to satisfy her so far, but perhaps she should have more definite knowledge concerning their trip. So she turned to Uncle John and said:

"Uncle, dear, to what part of Europe are we going?"

"What part?" he answered. "Why, it tells on the ticket, Patsy. I can't

remember the name just now. It's where the ship stops, of course."

"That is Napoli," said the thin faced man, with a scarcely veiled sneer.

"And then?"

"And then?" repeated Patsy, turning to her Uncle.

"Then? Oh, some confounded place or other that I can't think of. I'm not a time-table, Patsy; but the trip is all arranged, in beautiful style, by a friend of mine who has always wanted to go abroad, and so has the whole programme mapped out in his head."

"Is it in his head yet?" enquired Patsy, anxiously.

"No, dear; it's in the left hand pocket of my blue coat, all written down clearly. So what's the use of bothering? We aren't there yet. By and bye we'll get to Eu-rope an' do it up brown. Whatever happens, and wherever we go, it's got to be a spree and a jolly good time; so take it easy, Patsy dear, and don't worry."

"That's all right, Uncle," she rejoined, with a laugh. "I'm not worrying the least mite. But when folks ask us where we're going, what shall we say?"

"Eu-rope."

"And then?" mischievously.

"And then home again, of course. It's as plain as the nose on your face, Patsy Doyle, and a good bit straighter."

That made her laugh again, and the strange Italian, who was listening, growled a word in his native language. He wasn't at all a pleasant companion, but for that very reason Patsy determined to make him talk and "be sociable." By degrees he seemed to appreciate her attention, and always brightened when she came to sit beside him.

"You'll have to tell me your name, you know," she said to him; "because I can't be calling you 'Sir' every minute."

He glanced nervously around. Then he answered, slowly:

"I am called Valdi--Victor Valdi."

"Oh, that's a pretty name, Mr. Valdi--or should I say Signor?"

"You should."

"Do I pronounce it right?"

"No."

"Well, never mind if I don't; you'll know what I mean, and that I intend to be proper and polite," she responded, sweetly.

Beth, while she made fewer acquaintances than Patsy, seemed to have cast off her sullen reserve when she boarded the ship. In truth, the girl was really happy for the first time in her life, and it softened her so wonderfully and made her so attractive that she soon formed a select circle around her. A young lady from Cleveland, who had two big brothers, was impelled to introduce herself to Beth because of the young men's intense admiration for the girl's beautiful face. When it was found that they were all from Ohio, they formed a friendly alliance at once. Marion Horton was so frank and agreeable that she managed to draw out all that was best in Beth's nature, and the stalwart young Hortons were so shyly enthusiastic over this, their first trip abroad, that they inspired the girl with a like ardor, which resulted in the most cordial relations between them.

And it so happened that several other young men who chanced to be aboard the "Princess Irene" marked the Hortons' intimacy with Beth and insisted on being introduced by them, so that by the time Louise had conquered her mal-de-mer and appeared on deck, she found an admiring group around her cousin that included most of the desirable young fellows on the ship. Beth sat enthroned like a queen, listening to her courtiers and smiling encouragement now and then, but taking little part in the conversation herself because of her inexperience. Such adoration was new to the little country girl, and she really enjoyed it. Nor did

the young men resent her silence. All that they wanted her to do, as Tom Horton tersely expressed it, was to "sit still and look pretty."

As for Uncle John, he was so delighted with Beth's social success that he adopted all the boys on the spot, and made them a part of what he called his family circle.

Louise, discovering this state of affairs, gave an amused laugh and joined the group. She was a little provoked that she had isolated herself so long in her cabin when there was interesting sport on deck; but having lost some valuable time she straightway applied herself to redeem the situation.

In the brilliance of her conversation, in her studied glances, in a thousand pretty ways that were skillfully rendered effective, she had a decided advantage over her more beautiful cousin. When Louise really desired to please she was indeed a charming companion, and young men are not likely to detect insincerity in a girl who tries to captivate them.

The result was astonishing to Uncle John and somewhat humiliating to Beth; for a new queen was presently crowned, and Louise by some magnetic power assembled the court around herself. Only the youngest Horton boy, in whose susceptible heart Beth's image was firmly enshrined, refused to change his allegiance; but in truth the girl enjoyed herself more genuinely in the society of one loyal cavalier than when so many were clamoring for her favors. The two would walk the deck together for hours

without exchanging a single word, or sit together silently listening to the band or watching the waves, without the need, as Tom expressed it, of "jabbering every blessed minute" in order to be happy.

Patsy was indignant at the artfulness of Louise until she noticed that Beth was quite content; then she laughed softly and watched matters take their course, feeling a little sorry for the boys because she knew Louise was only playing with them.

The trip across the Atlantic was all too short. On the fifth of April they passed the Azores, running close to the islands of Fayal and San Jorge so that the passengers might admire the zigzag rows of white houses that reached from the shore far up the steep hillsides. On the sixth day they sighted Gibraltar and passed between the Moorish and Spanish lighthouses into the lovely waters of the Mediterranean. The world-famed rock was now disclosed to their eyes, and when the ship anchored opposite it Uncle John assisted his nieces aboard the lighter and took them for a brief excursion ashore.

Of course they rode to the fortress and wandered through its gloomy, impressive galleries, seeing little of the armament because visitors are barred from the real fortifications. The fortress did not seem especially impregnable and was, taken altogether, a distinct disappointment to them; but the ride through the town in the low basket phaetons was wholly delightful. The quaint, narrow streets and stone arches, the beautiful vistas of sea and mountain, the swarthy, dark-eyed

Moors whose presence lent to the town an oriental atmosphere, and the queer market-places crowded with Spaniards, Frenchmen, Jews and red-coated English soldiers, altogether made up a panorama that was fascinating in the extreme.

But their stay was short, and after a rush of sightseeing that almost bewildered them they returned to the ship breathless but elated at having "seen an' done," as Uncle John declared, their first foreign port.

And now through waters so brightly blue and transparent that they aroused the girls' wonder and admiration, the good ship plowed her way toward the port of Naples, passing to the east of Sardinia and Corsica, which they viewed with eager interest because these places had always seemed so far away to them, and had now suddenly appeared as if by magic directly before their eyes.

Patsy and the big whiskered captain had become such good friends that he always welcomed the girl on his own exclusive deck, and this afternoon she sat beside him and watched the rugged panorama slip by.

"When will we get to Naples?" she asked.

"To-morrow evening, probably," answered the captain. "See, it is over in that direction, where the gray cloud appears in the sky."

"And what is the gray cloud, Captain?"

"I do not know," said he, gravely. "Perhaps smoke from Vesuvius. At Gibraltar we heard that the volcano is in an ugly mood, I hope it will cause you no inconvenience."

"Wouldn't it be fine if we could see an eruption!" exclaimed the girl.

The captain shook his head.

"Interesting, perhaps," he admitted; "but no great calamity that causes thousands of people to suffer can be called 'fine.'"

"Ah, that is true!" she said, quickly. "I had forgotten the suffering."

Next morning all the sky was thick with smoke, and the sun was hidden. The waters turned gray, too, and as they approached the Italian coast the gloom perceptibly increased. A feeling of uneasiness seemed to pervade the ship, and even the captain had so many things to consider that he had no time to converse with his little friend.

Signor Valdi forsook his deck chair for the first time and stood at the rail which overlooked the steerage with his eyes glued to the grim skies ahead. When Uncle John asked him what he saw he answered, eagerly:

"Death and destruction, and a loss of millions of lira to the bankrupt

government. I know; for I have studied Etna for years, and Vesuvio is a second cousin to Etna."

"Hm," said Uncle John. "You seem pleased with the idea of an eruption."

The thin faced man threw a shrewd look from his dark eyes and smiled. Uncle John frowned at the look and stumped away. He was not at all easy in his own mind. He had brought three nieces for a holiday to this foreign shore, and here at the outset they were confronted by an intangible danger that was more fearful because it was not understood. It was enough to make his round face serious, although he had so strong an objection to unnecessary worry.

Afternoon tea was served on deck amidst an unusual quiet. People soberly canvassed the situation and remarked upon the fact that the darkness increased visibly as they neared the Bay of Naples. Beth couldn't drink her tea, for tiny black atoms fell through the air and floated upon the surface of the liquid. Louise retired to her stateroom with a headache, and found her white serge gown peppered with particles of lava dust which had fallen from the skies.

The pilot guided the ship cautiously past Capri and into the bay. The air was now black with volcanic dross and a gloom as of midnight surrounded them on every side. The shore, the mountain and the water of the bay itself were alike invisible.