

CHAPTER XII

MOVING ON

"Here's a letter from my dear old friend Silas Watson," said Uncle John, delightedly. "It's from Palermo, where he has been staying with his ward--and your friend, girls--Kenneth Forbes, and he wants me to lug you all over to Sicily at once."

"That's jolly," said Patsy, with a bright smile. "I'd like to see Kenneth again."

"I suppose he is a great artist, by this time," said Beth, musingly.

"How singular!" exclaimed Louise. "Count Ferralti told me only this morning that he had decided to go to Palermo."

"Really?" said Uncle John.

"Yes, Uncle. Isn't it a coincidence?"

"Why, as for that," he answered, slowly, "I'm afraid it will prevent our seeing the dear count--or whatever he is--again, at least for some time. For Mr. Watson and Kenneth are just leaving Palermo, and he asks us to meet him in another place altogether, a town called--called--let

me see; Tormenti, or Terminal, or something."

"Give me the letter, dear," said Patsy. "I don't believe it's Terminal at all. Of course not," consulting the pages, "it's Taormina."

"Is that in Sicily?" he asked.

"Yes. Listen to what Mr. Watson says: 'I'm told it is the most beautiful spot in the world, which is the same thing you hear about most beautiful places. It is eight hundred feet above the Mediterranean and nestles peacefully in the shadow of Mount Etna.'"

"Etna!" cried Uncle John, with a start. "Isn't that another volcano?"

"To be sure," said Beth, the geographer. "Etna is the biggest volcano in the world."

"Does it spout?" he asked, anxiously.

"All the time, they say. But it is not usually dangerous."

"The proper thing, when you go to Eu-rope," declared Uncle John, positively, "is to do Venice, where the turpentine comes from, and Switzerland, where they make chocolate and goat's milk, and Paris and Monte Carlo, where they kick high and melt pearls in champagne. Everybody knows that. That's what goin' to Eu-rope really means. But

Sicily isn't on the programme, that I ever heard of. So we'll just tell Silas Watson that we'll see him later--which means when we get home again."

"But Sicily is beautiful," protested Patsy. "I'd as soon go there as anywhere."

"It's a very romantic place," added Louise, reflectively.

"Everybody goes to France and Switzerland," remarked Beth. "But it's because they don't know any better. Let's be original, Uncle, and keep out of the beaten track of travel."

"But the volcano!" exclaimed Mr. Merrick. "Is it necessary to stick to volcanoes to be original?"

"Etna won't hurt us, I'm sure," said Patsy.

"Isn't there a Greek theatre at Taormina?" asked Louise.

"I've never heard of it; but I suppose the Greeks have, if it's there," he replied. "But why not wait till we get home, and then go to Kieth's or Hammerstein's?"

"You don't understand, dear. This theatre is very ancient."

"Playing minstrel shows in it yet, I suppose. Well, girls, if you say Sicily, Sicily it is. All I'm after is to give you a good time, and if you get the volcano habit it isn't my fault."

"It is possible the Count said Taormina, instead of Palermo," remarked Louise, plaintively. "I wasn't paying much attention at the time. I'll ask him."

The others ignored this suggestion. Said Patsy to her uncle:

"When do we go, sir?"

"Whenever you like, my dears."

"Then I vote to move on at once," decided the girl. "We've got the best out of Naples, and it's pretty grimey here yet."

The other nieces agreed with her, so Uncle John went out to enquire the best way to get to Sicily, and to make their arrangements.

The steamer "Victor Emmanuel" of the Navigazione General Italiana line was due to leave Naples for Messina the next evening, arriving at its destination the following morning. Uncle John promptly booked places. The intervening day was spent in packing and preparing for the journey, and like all travellers the girls were full of eager excitement at the prospect of seeing something new.

"I'm told Sicily is an island," grumbled Uncle John. "Here we are, on a trip to Eu-rope, and emigrating to an island the first thing we do."

"Sicily is Europe, all right, Uncle," answered Patsy. "At least, it isn't Asia or Africa."

That assertion seemed to console him a little, and he grew cheerful again.

The evening was beautiful as they embarked, but soon after leaving the bay the little, tub-shaped steamer began to tumble and toss vigorously, so that all the passengers aboard speedily sought their berths.

Uncle John found himself in a stuffy little cabin that smelled of tar and various other flavors that were too mixed to be recognizable. As a result he passed one of the most miserable nights of his life.

Toward morning he rolled out and dressed himself, preferring the deck to his bed, and the first breath of salt air did much to restore him. Day was just breaking, and to the right he could see a tongue of fire flaming against the dark sky.

"What is that, sir?" he enquired of an officer who passed.

"That is Stromboli, signor, the great volcano of Lipari. It is always in

eruption."

Uncle John groaned.

"Volcanoes to right of us, volcanoes to left of us volleyed and thundered," he muttered dismally, as he fell back in his chair.

The sky brightened, and the breath of the breeze changed and came to him laden with delicious fragrance.

"See, signore!" called the officer, passing again; "before us is mighty Etna--you can see it clearly from the bow."

"Volcanoes in front of us, volcanoes behind us!" wailed the little man.

But he walked to the bow and saw the shores of Sicily looming in advance, with the outline of the stately mountain rising above and dominating it.

Then the sun burst forth, flooding all with a golden radiance that was magical in its gorgeous effects. Patsy came on deck and stood beside her uncle, lost in rapturous admiration. Beth soon followed her.

Before long they entered the Straits of Messina and passed between the classic rock of Scylla on the Calabrian coast, and the whirlpool of Charybdis at the point of the promontory of Faro, which forms the end of the famous "Golden Sickle" enclosing the Bay of Messina.

"If this is really Eu-rope, I'm glad we came," said Uncle John, drawing a long breath as the ship came to anchor opposite the Palazzo Municipale. "I don't remember seeing anything prettier since we left New York."

Presently they had loaded their trunks and hand baggage, and incidentally themselves, into the boat of the Hotel Trinacria which came alongside in charge of a sleepy porter. After a brief examination at the custom-house, where Uncle John denied having either sugar, tobacco or perfumery, they followed on foot the truck laden with their worldly possessions, and soon reached the hotel.

A pleasant breakfast followed, which they ate before a window overlooking the busy marina, and then they drove about the town for a time to see in a casual way the "sights." In the afternoon they took the train for Taormina. Messina seemed a delightful place, but if they were going to settle in Taormina for a time it would not pay them to unpack or linger on the way.

So they rolled along the coast for a couple of hours in a quaint, old-fashioned railway carriage, and were then deposited upon the platform of the little station at Giardini.

"I'm afraid there has been a mistake," said the little man, gazing around him anxiously. "There's no town here, and I told the guard to put

us off at Taormina--not this forlorn place."

Just then Beth discovered a line of carriages drawn up back of the station. The drivers were mostly asleep inside them, although several stood in a group arguing in fluent Italian the grave question as to whether Signora Gani's cow had a black patch over its left shoulder, or not.

Some of the carriages bore signs: "Hotel Timeo;" "Grand Hotel San Domenico;" "Hotel Castello-a-Mare;" "Grand Hotel Metropole," and so forth. In that of the Castello-a-Mare the man was awakening and rubbing his eyes. Uncle John said to him:

"Good morning. Had a nice rest?"

"I thank you, signore, I am well refreshed," was the reply.

"By the way, can you tell us where the town of Taormina is? I hate to trouble you; but we'd like to know."

The man waved an arm upward, and following the motion with their eyes they saw a line of precipitous cliffs that seemed impossible to scale.

"Do you desire to go to the Grand Hotel Castello-a-Mare?" enquired the driver, politely.

"Is it in Taormina?"

"Most certainly, signore."

"And you will take us?"

"With pleasure, signore."

"Oh; I didn't know. I supposed you were going to sleep again."

The man looked at him reproachfully.

"It is my business, signore. I am very attentive to my duties. If you permit me to drive you to our splendide--our magnifico hotel--you will confer a favor."

"How about the baggage?"

"The trunks, signor, we will send for later. There is really no hurry about them. The small baggage will accompany us. You will remark how excellent is my English. I am Frascatti Vietri; perhaps you have heard of me in America?"

"If I have it has escaped my memory," said Uncle John, gravely.

"Have you been to America?" asked Beth.

"Surely, signorina. I lived in Chicago, which, as you are aware, is America. My uncle had a fruit shop in South Water, a via which is Chicago. Is it not so? You will find few in Taormina who can the English speak, and none at all who can so perfectly speak it as Frascatti Vietri."

"You are wonderful," said Patsy, delighted with him. But Uncle John grew impatient to be off.

"I hate to interrupt you, Mr. Vietri," he hinted; "but if you can spare the time we may as well make a start."

The driver consented. He gracefully swung the suit-cases and travelling bags to the top of the vehicle and held the door open while his fares entered. Then he mounted to his seat, took the reins, and spoke to the horses. Some of the other drivers nodded at him cheerfully, but more as if they were sorry he must exert himself than with any resentment at his success in getting the only tourists who had alighted from the train.

As they moved away Uncle John said: "Observe the difference between the cab-drivers here and those at home. In America they fight like beasts to get a job; here they seem anxious to avoid earning an honest penny. If there could be a happy medium somewhere, I'd like it."

"Are we going to the best hotel?" asked Louise, who had seemed a trifle

disconsolate because she had not seen Count Ferralti since leaving Naples.

"I don't know, my dear. It wasn't a question of choice, but of necessity. No other hotel seemed willing to receive us."

They were now winding upward over a wonderful road cut in the solid rock. It was broad and smooth and protected by a parapet of dressed limestone. Now and then they passed pleasant villas set in orchards of golden oranges or groves of olives and almonds; but there was no sign of life on any side.

The road was zigzag, making a long ascent across the face of the cape, then turning abruptly to wind back again, but always creeping upward until an open space showed the station far below and a rambling stone building at the edge of the cliff far above.

"Behold!" cried Frascatti, pointing up, "the Grand Hotel Castello-a-Mare; is it not the eccellenza location?"

"Has it a roof?" asked Uncle John, critically.

"Of a certainty, signore! But it does not show from below," was the grave reply.

At times Frascatti stopped his horses to allow them to rest, and then he

would turn in his seat to address his passengers in the open victoria and descant upon the beauties of the panorama each turn unfolded.

"This road is new," said he, "because we are very progressive and the old road was most difficulty. Then it was three hours from the bottom to the top. Now it is but a short hour, for our energy climbs the three miles in that brief time. Shall I stop here for the sunset, or will your excellenzi hasten on?"

"If your energy approves, we will hasten," returned Uncle John. "We love a sunset, because it's bound to set anyway, and we may as well make the best of it; but we have likewise an objection to being out after dark. Any brigands around here?"

"Brigands! Ah; the signor is merry. Never, since the days of Naxos, have brigands infested our fair country."

"When were the days of Naxos?"

"Some centuries before Christ, signor," bowing his head and making the sign of the cross.

"Very good. The brigands of those days must, of course, be dead by this time. Now, sir, when you have leisure, let us hasten."

The horses started and crept slowly upward again. None of the party was

in a hurry. Such beautiful glimpses of scenery were constantly visible from the bends of the road that the girls were enraptured, and could have ridden for hours in this glorious fairyland.

But suddenly the horses broke into a trot and dragged the carriage rapidly forward over the last incline. A moment later they dashed into the court of the hotel and the driver with a loud cry of "Oo-ah!" and a crack of his whip drew up before the entrance.

The portiere and the padrone, or landlord--the latter being also the proprietaire--came out to greet them, extending to their guests a courteous welcome. The house was very full. All of the cheaper rooms were taken; but of course the Signor Americain would wish only the best and be glad to pay.

Uncle John requested them to rob him as modestly as possible without conflicting with their sense of duty, and they assured him they would do so.

The rooms were adorable. They faced the sea and had little balconies that gave one a view of the blue Mediterranean far beneath, with lovely Isola Bella and the Capo San Andrea nestling on its bosom. To the right towered the majestic peak of Etna, its crest just now golden red in the dying sunset.

The girls drew in deep breaths and stood silent in a very ecstasy of

delight. At their feet was a terraced garden, running downward two hundred feet to where the crag fell sheer to the sea. It was glorious with blooming flowers of every sort that grows, and the people on the balconies imagined at the moment they had been transferred to an earthly paradise too fair and sweet for ordinary mortals. And then the glow of the sun faded softly and twilight took its place. Far down the winding road could be seen the train of carriages returning from the station, the vetturini singing their native songs as the horses slowly ascended the slope. An unseen organ somewhere in the distance ground out a Neapolitan folk song, and fresh and youthful voices sang a clear, high toned accompaniment.

Even practical Uncle John stood absorbed and admiring until the soft voice of the facchino called to ask if he wanted hot water in which to bathe before dinner.

"It's no use," said Patsy, smiling at him from the next balcony with tears in her eyes; "There's not another Taormina on earth. Here we are, and here we stay until we have to go home again."

"But, my dear, think of Paris, of Venice, of--"

"I'll think of nothing but this, Uncle John. Unless you settle down with us here I'll turn milkmaid and live all my days in Sicily!"

Beth laughed, and drew her into their room.

"Don't be silly, Patsy dear," she said, calmly, although almost as greatly affected as her cousin. "There are no cows here, so you can't be a milkmaid."

"Can't I milk the goats, then?"

"Why, the men seem to do that, dear. But cheer up. We've only seen the romance of Taormina yet; doubtless it will be commonplace enough to-morrow."