

## CHAPTER XIII

### IL DUCA

Beth's prediction, however, did not come true. The morning discovered nothing commonplace about Taormina. Their hotel was outside the walls, but a brief walk took them to the Messina Gate, a quaint archway through which they passed into the narrow streets of one of the oldest towns in Sicily. Doorways and windows of Saracen or Norman construction faced them on every side, and every inch of the ancient buildings was picturesque and charming.

Some of the houses had been turned into shops, mostly for the sale of curios. Uncle John and his nieces had scarcely passed a hundred yards into the town when one of these shops arrested their attention. It was full of antique jewelry, antique furniture, antique laces and antique pottery--all of the most fascinating description. The jewelry was tarnished and broken, the lace had holes in it and the furniture was decrepit and unsteady; but the proprietor cared nothing for such defects. All was very old, and he knew the tourist was eager to buy. So he scattered his wares inside and outside his salesroom, much as the spider spreads his web for the unwary, and waited for the inevitable tourist with a desire to acquire something ancient and useless.

The girls could not be induced to pass the shop. They entered the

square, low room and flooded the shopman with eager questions. Notwithstanding Frascatti's assertion that few in Taormina could speak English, this man was quite intelligible and fixed his prices according to the impression his wares made upon the artistic sense of the young American ladies.

It was while they were intently inspecting some laces that the proprietor suddenly paused in his chatter, removed his hat and bowed almost to the floor, his face assuming at the same time a serious and most humble expression.

Turning around they saw standing outside the door a man whom they recognized at once as their fellow passenger aboard the "Princess Irene."

"Oh, Signor Valdi!" cried Patsy, running toward him, "how strange to find you again in this out-of-the-way place."

The Italian frowned, but in a dignified manner took the hand of all three girls in turn and then bowed a greeting to Mr. Merrick.

Uncle John thought the fellow had improved in appearance. Instead of the flannel shirt and Prince Albert coat he had affected on shipboard he now wore a native costume of faded velvet, while a cloak of thin but voluminous cloth swung from his shoulders, and a soft felt hat shaded his dark eyes.

His appearance was entirely in keeping with the place, and the American noticed that the villagers who passed doffed their hats most respectfully to this seemingly well-known individual. But mingled with their polite deference was a shyness half fearful, and none stopped to speak but hurried silently on.

"And how do we happen to find you here, Signor Valdi?" Patsy was saying. "Do you live in Taormina?"

"I am of this district, but not of Taormina," he replied. "It is chance that you see me here. Eh, Signor Bruggi, is it not so?" casting one of his characteristic fierce glances at the shopkeeper.

"It is so, your excellency."

"But I am glad you have come to the shadow of Etna," he continued, addressing the Americans with slow deliberation. "Here the grandeur of the world centers, and life keeps time with Nature. You will like it? You will stay?"

"Oh, for a time, anyway," said Patsy.

"We expect to meet some friends here," explained Uncle John. "They are coming down from Palermo, but must have been delayed somewhere on the way."

"Who are they?" asked Valdi, brusquely.

"Americans, of course; Silas Watson and Kenneth Forbes. Do you know of them?"

"No," said the other. He cast an uneasy glance up and down the street.

"I will meet you again, signorini," he added. "Which is your hotel?"

"The Castello-a-Mare. It is delightful," said Beth.

He nodded, as if pleased. Then, folding his cloak about him, he murmured "adios!" and stalked away without another word or look.

"Queer fellow," remarked Uncle John.

The shopkeeper drew a long breath and seemed relieved.

"Il Duca is unusual, signore," he replied.

"Duke!" cried the girls, in one voice.

The man seemed startled.

"I--I thought you knew him; you seemed friends," he stammered.

"We met Signor Valdi on shipboard," said Uncle John.

"Valdi? Ah, yes; of course; the duke has been to America."

"Isn't his name Valdi?" asked Beth, looking the man straight in the eyes. "Has he another name here, where he lives?"

The shopman hesitated.

"Who knows?" was the evasive reply. "Il Duca has many names, but we do not speak them. When it is necessary to mention him we use his title--the duke."

"Why?" asked the girl.

"Why, signorina? Why? Perhaps because he does not like to be talked about. Yes; that is it, I am sure."

"Where does he live?" asked Patsy.

The man seemed uneasy under so much questioning.

"Somewhere in the mountains," he said, briefly. "His estates are there. He is said to be very rich and powerful. I know nothing more, signorini."

Realizing that little additional information could be gleaned from this source they soon left the shop and wandered into the Piazza Vittorio Emanuele, and from thence by the narrow lane to the famous Teatro Greco.

For a time they admired this fascinating ruin, which has the best preserved stage of any Greek theatre now in existence. From the top of the hill is one of the most magnificent views in Sicily, and here our travellers sat in contemplative awe until Uncle John declared it was time to return to their hotel for luncheon.

As they passed the portiere's desk Mr. Merrick paused to ask that important official:

"Tell me, if you please, who is Signor Victor Valdi?"

"Valdi, signore?"

"Yes; the Duke di Valdi, I suppose you call him."

"I have never heard of him," replied the man.

"But every one seems to know him in Taormina."

"Is it so? We have but one duke near to us, and he--. But never mind. I do not know this Valdi."

"A thin faced man, with black eyes. We met him on the steamer coming from America."

The portiere dropped his eyes and turned toward his desk.

"Luncheon is served, signore," he remarked. "Also, here is a letter for you, which arrived this morning."

Uncle John took the letter and walked on to rejoin the girls.

"It seems hard work to find out anything about this Valdi," he said.

"Either the folks here do not know him, or they won't acknowledge his acquaintance. We may as well follow suit, and avoid him."

"I don't like his looks a bit," observed Beth. "He seems afraid and defiant at the same time, and his temper is dreadful. It was only with great difficulty he could bring himself to be polite to us."

"Oh, I always got along with him all right," said Patsy. "I'm sure Signor Valdi isn't as bad as he appears. And he's a duke, too, girls--a real duke!"

"So it seems," Uncle John rejoined; "yet there is something queer about the fellow, I agree with Beth; I don't like him."

"Did Mr. Watson say when he would join us here?" enquired Louise, when

they were seated at the little round table.

"No; but here's a letter from him. I'd quite forgotten it."

He tore open the envelope and carefully read the enclosure.

"Too bad," said he. "We might have stayed a few days in Messina. Watson says he and Kenneth have stopped at Girgenti--wherever that is--to study the temples. Wonder if they're Solomon's? They won't get to Taormina before Saturday."

"It won't matter," declared Patsy, "so long as they arrive then. And I'd a good deal rather be here than in Messina, or any other place. Of course we'll all be glad to see Kenneth."

"Mr. Watson wants us to be very careful while we are in Sicily," continued Uncle John, referring to the letter. "Listen to this: 'Don't let the girls wear jewelry in public places, or display their watches openly; and take care, all of you, not to show much money. If you buy anything, have it sent to your hotel to be paid for by the hall porter. And it is wise not to let anyone know who you are or how long you intend to remain in any one place. This may strike you as an absurd precaution; but you must remember that you are not in America, but in an isolated Italian province, where government control is inefficient. The truth is that the terrible Mafia is still all powerful on this island, and brigandage is by no means confined to the neighborhood of

Castrogiovanni, as the guide books would have you believe. The people seem simple and harmless enough, but Kenneth and I always keep our revolvers handy, and believe it is a reasonable precaution. I don't want to frighten you, John; merely to warn you. Sicily is full of tourists, and few are ever molested; but if you are aware of the conditions underlying the public serenity you are not so liable to run yourself and your nieces into needless dangers.' How's that for a hair-curler, girls?"

"It sounds very romantic," said Louise, smiling. "Mr. Watson is such a cautious man!"

"But it's all rubbish about there being danger in Taormina," declared Patsy, indignantly. "Mr. Watson has been in the wilds of the interior, which Baedeker admits is infested with brigands. Here everyone smiles at us in the friendliest way possible."

"Except the duke," added Beth, with a laugh.

"Oh, the duke is sour by nature," Patsy answered; "but if there really was danger, I'm sure he'd protect us, for he lives here and knows the country."

"You are sure of a lot of things, dear," said her cousin, smiling. "But it will do no harm to heed the advice, and be careful."

They all agreed to that, and Uncle John was glad to remember he had two brand new revolvers in the bottom of his trunk, which he could use in an emergency if he could manage to find the cartridges to load them with.

He got them out next morning, and warned his nieces not to touch the dangerous things when they entered his room. But Patsy laughed at him, saying:

"You are behind the times, Uncle. Beth has carried a revolver ever since we started."

"Beth!" he cried, horrified.

"Just as a precaution," said that young lady, demurely.

"But you're only a child!"

"Even so, Uncle, I have been taught to shoot in Cloverton, as a part of my education. Once I won a medal--think of that! So I brought my pet revolver along, although I may never have need to use it."

Uncle John looked thoughtful.

"It doesn't seem like a girlish accomplishment, exactly," he mused.

"When I was young and went into the West, the times were a bit unsettled, and I used to carry a popgun myself. But I never shot at a

human being in my life. There were women in the camps that could shoot, too; but the safest place was always in front of them. If Beth has won a medal, though, she might hit something."

"Don't try, Beth," said Louise; "you ought to make a hit without shooting."

"Thank you, dear."

As they left their hotel for a walk they came upon Count Ferralti, who was standing in the court calmly smoking a cigarette. His right hand was still in a sling.

No one was greatly surprised at his appearance, but Uncle John uttered an exclamation of impatience. It annoyed him that this fellow, whose antecedents were decidedly cloudy, should be "chasing around" after one of his nieces, Beth and Patsy smiled at each other significantly as the young man was discovered, but Louise, with a slight blush, advanced to greet Ferralti in her usual pleasant and cordial way.

There was no use resenting the intrusion. They owed a certain consideration to this boyish Italian for his assistance on the Amalfi road. But Uncle John almost wished he had left them to escape as best they might, for the obligation was getting to be decidedly onerous.

While Ferralti was expressing his astonishment at so "unexpectedly"

meeting again his American friends, Uncle John discovered their English speaking cocchiere, Frascatti Vietri, lolling half asleep on the box of his victoria.

"Would your energy like to drive us this morning?" he asked.

"It is my duty, signore, if you wish to go," was the reply.

"Then you are engaged. Come, girls; hop in, if you want to ride."

The three nieces and Uncle John just filled the victoria. The count was disconsolate at being so cleverly dropped from the party, but could only flourish his hat and wish them a pleasant drive.

They descended the winding road to the coast, where Frascatti took the highway to Sant' Alessio, a charming drive leading to the Taormina Pass.

"By the way," Uncle John asked the driver, "do you know of a duke that lives in this neighborhood?"

The laughing face of the Sicilian suddenly turned grave.

"No, signore. There is the Prince di Scaletta; but no duke on this side the town."

"But on the other side?"

"Oh; in the mountains? To be sure there are noblemen there; old estates almost forgotten in our great civilization of to-day. We are very progressive in Taormina, signore. There will be a fountain of the ice cream soda established next summer. Quite metropolitan, ne c'e?"

"Quite. But, tell me, Frascatti, have you a duke in the mountains back of Taormina?"

"Signore, I beg you to pay no attention to the foolish stories you may hear from our peasants. There has been no brigandage here for centuries. I assure you the country is perfectly safe--especial if you stay within the town or take me on your drives. They know me, signore, and even Il Duca dares not trifle with my friends."

"Why should he, Frascatti, if there is no brigandage? Is it the Mafia?"

"Ah, I have heard that Mafia spoken of, but mostly when I lived in America, which is Chicago. Here we do not know of the Mafia."

"But you advise us to be careful?"

"Everywhere, illustrissimo signore, it is well to be what you call the circumspection. I remember that in the State street of Chicago, which is America, peaceful citizens were often killed by bandits. Eh, is it not so?"

"Quite probable," said Uncle John, soberly.

"Then, what will you? Are we worse than Americans, that you fear us? Never mind Il Duca, or the tales they foolishly whisper of him. Here you may be as safe and happy as in Chicago--which is America."

He turned to his horses and urged them up a slope. The girls and Uncle John eyed one another enquiringly.

"Our duke seems to bear no good reputation," said Beth, in a tone so low that Frascatti could not overhear. "Everyone fears to speak of him."

"Singular," said Uncle John, "that Patsy's friend turns out to be a mystery, even in his own home. I wonder if he is a leader of the Mafia, or just a common brigand?"

"In either case," said Patsy, "he will not care to injure us, I am sure. We all treated him very nicely, and I just made him talk and be sociable, whether he wanted to or not. That ought to count for something in our favor. But my opinion is that he's just a gruff old nobleman who lives in the hills and makes few friends."

"And hasn't a name, any more than Louise's count has. Is it customary, my dear, for all Italian noblemen to conceal their identity?"

"I do not know, Uncle," answered Louise, casting down her eyes.