

CHAPTER XV

DAYS OF ANXIETY

Uncle John's nieces passed a miserable night. Patsy stole into his room and prayed fervently beside his bed that her dear uncle might be preserved and restored to them in health and safety. Beth, meantime, paced the room she shared with Patsy with knitted brows and flashing eyes, the flush in her cheeks growing deeper as her anger increased. An ungovernable temper was the girl's worst failing; the abductors of her uncle were arousing in her the most violent passions of which she was capable, and might lead her to adopt desperate measures. She was only a country girl, and little experienced in life, yet Beth might be expected to undertake extraordinary things if, as she expressed it, if she "got good and mad!"

No sound was heard during the night from the room occupied by Louise, but the morning disclosed a white, drawn face and reddened eyelids as proof that she had rested as little as her cousins.

Yet, singularly enough, Louise was the most composed of the three when they gathered in the little sitting room at daybreak, and tried earnestly to cheer the spirits of her cousins. Louise never conveyed the impression of being especially sincere, but the pleasant words and manners she habitually assumed rendered her an agreeable companion, and

this faculty of masking her real feelings now stood her in good stead and served to relieve the weight of anxiety that oppressed them all.

Frascati came limping back with his tired followers in the early dawn, and reported that no trace of the missing man had been observed. There were no brigands and no Mafia; on that point all his fellow townsmen agreed with him fully. But it was barely possible some lawless ones who were all unknown to the honest Taorminians had made the rich American a prisoner.

Il Duca? Oh, no, signorini! A thousand times, no. Il Duca was queer and unsociable, but not lawless. He was of noble family and a native of the district. It would be very wrong and foolish to question Il Duca's integrity.

With this assertion Frascatti went to bed. He had not shirked the search, because he was paid for it, and he and his men had tramped the mountains faithfully all night, well knowing it would result in nothing but earning their money.

On the morning train from Catania arrived Silas Watson and his young ward Kenneth Forbes, the boy who had so unexpectedly inherited Aunt Jane's fine estate of Elmhurst on her death. The discovery of a will which gave to Kenneth all the property their aunt had intended for her nieces had not caused the slightest estrangement between the young folks, then or afterward. On the contrary, the girls were all glad that

the gloomy, neglected boy, with his artistic, high-strung temperament, would be so well provided for. Without the inheritance he would have been an outcast; now he was able to travel with his guardian, the kindly old Elmhurst lawyer, and fit himself for his future important position in the world. More than all this, however, Kenneth had resolved to be a great landscape painter, and Italy and Sicily had done much, in the past year, to prepare him for this career.

The boy greeted his old friends with eager delight, not noticing for the moment their anxious faces and perturbed demeanor. But the lawyer's sharp eyes saw at once that something was wrong.

"Where is John Merrick?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come!" cried Patsy, clinging to his hand.

"We are in sore straits, indeed, Mr. Watson," said Louise.

"Uncle John is lost," explained Beth, "and we're afraid he is in the hands of brigands."

Then she related as calmly as she could all that had happened. The relation was clear and concise. She told of their meeting with Valdi on the ship, of Count Ferralti's persistence in attaching himself to their party, and of Uncle John's discovery that the young man was posing under an assumed name. She did not fail to mention Ferralti's timely

assistance on the Amalfi drive, or his subsequent devoted attentions to Louise; but the latter Beth considered merely as an excuse for following them around.

"In my opinion," said she, "we have been watched ever since we left America, by these two spies, who had resolved to get Uncle John into some unfrequented place and then rob him. If they succeed in their vile plot, Mr. Watson, we shall be humiliated and disgraced forever."

"Tut-tut," said he; "don't think of that. Let us consider John Merrick, and nothing else."

Louise protested that Beth had not been fair in her conclusions. The Count was an honorable man; she would vouch for his character herself.

But Mr. Watson did not heed this defense. The matter was very serious--how serious he alone realized--and his face was grave indeed as he listened to the descriptions of that terrible Il Duca whom the natives all shrank from and refused to discuss.

When he had learned all the nieces had to tell he hastened into the town and telegraphed the American consul at Messina. Then he found the questura, or police office, and was assured by the officer in attendance that the disappearance of Mr. Merrick was already known to the authorities and every effort was being made to find him.

"Do you think he has been abducted by brigands?" asked the lawyer.

"Brigands, signore?" was the astonished reply. "There are no brigands in this district at all. We drove them out many years ago."

"How about Il Duca?"

"And who is that, signore?"

"Don't you know?"

"I assure you we have no official knowledge of such a person. There are dukes in Sicily, to be sure; but 'Il Duca' means nothing. Perhaps you can tell me to whom you refer?"

"See here," said the lawyer, brusquely; "I know your methods, questore mia, but they won't prove effective in this case. If you think an American is helpless in this country you are very much mistaken. But, to save time, I am willing to submit to your official requirements. I will pay you well for the rescue of my friend."

"All shall be done that is possible."

"But if you do not find him at once, and return him to us unharmed, I will have a regiment of soldiers in Taormina to search your mountains and break up the bands of brigands that infest them. When I prove that

brigands are here and that you were not aware of them, you will be disgraced and deposed from your office."

The official shrugged his shoulders, a gesture in which the Sicilian is as expert as the Frenchman.

"I will welcome the soldiery," said he; "but you will be able to prove nothing. The offer of a reward may accomplish more--if it is great enough to be interesting."

"How great is that?"

"Can I value your friend? You must name the reward yourself. But even then I can promise nothing. In the course of our duty every effort is now being made to find the missing American. But we work in the dark, as you know. Your friend may be a suicide; he may have lost his mind and wandered into the wilderness; he may have committed some crime and absconded. How do I know? You say he is missing, but that is no reason the brigands have him, even did brigands exist, which I doubt. Rest assured, signore, that rigid search will be made. It is my boast that I leave no duty unfulfilled."

Mr. Watson walked back to the telegraph office and found an answer to his message. The American consul was ill and had gone to Naples for treatment. When he returned, his clerk stated, the matter of the disappearance of John Merrick would immediately be investigated.

Feeling extremely helpless and more fearful for his friend than before, the lawyer returned to the hotel for a conference with the nieces.

"How much of a reward shall I offer?" he asked. "That seems to be the only thing that can be depended upon to secure results."

"Give them a million--Uncle John won't mind," cried Patsy, earnestly.

"Don't give them a penny, sir," said Beth. "If they are holding him for a ransom Uncle is in no personal danger, and we have no right to assist in robbing him."

"But you don't understand, my dear," asserted the lawyer. "These brigands never let a victim go free unless they are well paid. That is why they are so often successful. If John Merrick is not ransomed he will never again be heard of."

"But this is not a ransom, sir. You propose to offer a reward to the police."

"Let me explain. The ways of the Italian police are very intricate. They know of no brigandage here, and cannot find a brigand. But if the reward is great enough to divide, they know where to offer a share of it, in lieu of a ransom, and will force the brigands to accept it. In that way the police gets the glory of a rescue and a share of the spoils. If we

offer no reward, or an insignificant one, the brigands will be allowed to act as they please."

"That is outrageous!" exclaimed Beth.

"Yes. The Italian government deplotes it. It is trying hard to break up a system that has existed for centuries, but has not yet succeeded."

"Then I'd prefer to deal directly with the brigands."

"So would I, if--"

"If what, sir?"

"If we were sure your uncle is in their hands. Do you think the party you sent out last night searched thoroughly?"

"I hope so."

"I will send out more men at once. They shall search the hills in every direction. Should they find nothing our worst fears will be confirmed, and then--"

"Well, Mr. Watson?"

"Then we must wait for the brigands to dictate the terms of a ransom,

and make the best bargain we can."

"That seems sensible," said Kenneth, and both Patsy and Louise agreed with him, although it would be tedious waiting.

But Beth only bit her lip and frowned.

Mr. Watson's searching party was maintained all day--for two days, and three; but without result. Then they waited for the brigands to act.

But a week dragged painfully by and no word of John Merrick's whereabouts reached the ears of the weary watchers.