

CHAPTER XXVI

THE COUNT UNMASKS

"And now," said Uncle John, as he sat in their cosy sitting-room, propped in an easy chair with his feet upon a stool, "it's about time for you to give an account of yourselves, you young rascals."

They had eaten a late but very satisfactory dinner at the Castello-a-Mare, where the return of the missing ones was hailed with joy by the proprietor and his assistants. Even the little bewhiskered head-waiter, who resembled a jack-in-the-box more than he did a man, strove to celebrate the occasion by putting every good thing the house afforded before the returned guests. For, although they dared not interfere to protect the victims of the terrible Il Duca, the hotel people fully recognized the fact that brigandage was not a good advertisement for Taormina, and hoped the "little incident" would not become generally known.

Old Silas Watson, dignified lawyer as he was, actually danced a hornpipe when he beheld his old friend safe and sound. But he shook his head reproachfully when he learned of the adventure his ward and the two girls had undertaken with such temerity but marvelous success.

Beth had quickly recovered from her weakness, although Kenneth had

insisted on keeping her arm all the way home. But the girl had been silent and thoughtful, and would eat nothing at dinner.

When they had gathered in their room to talk it all over the lawyer thought his young friends deserved a reproof.

"The money wasn't worth the risk, you crazy lunatics!" he said.

"It wasn't the money at all," replied Patsy, demurely.

"No?"

"It was the principle of the thing. And wasn't Beth just wonderful, though?"

"Shucks!" said Kenneth. "She had to go and faint, like a ninny, and she cried all the way home, because she had hurt the brigand's finger."

The girl's eyes were still red, but she answered the boy's scornful remark by saying, gravely:

"I am sorry it had to be done. I'll never touch a revolver again as long as I live."

Uncle John gathered his brave niece into an ample embrace.

"I'm very proud of you, my dear," he said, stroking her hair lovingly, "and you mustn't pay any attention to that silly boy. I've always known you were true blue, Beth, and now you have proved it to everyone. It may have been a reckless thing to do, as Mr. Watson says, but you did it like a major, and saved our self-esteem as well as our money."

"Hurrah for Beth!" yelled the boy, changing his colors without a blush.

"If you don't shut up, I'll box your ears," said his guardian, sternly.

Uncle John and young Ferralti were the heroes of the evening. The little old gentleman smoked a big cigar and beamed upon his nieces and friends with intense satisfaction, while Ferralti sat glum and silent beside Louise until an abrupt challenge from Mr. Merrick effectually aroused him.

"I've only one fault to find with this young man," was the observation referred to: "that he made our acquaintance under false pretenses. When a fairly decent fellow becomes an impostor there is usually reason for it, and I would like Count Ferralti--or whatever his name is--to give us that reason and make a clean breast of his deception."

Ferralti bowed, with a serious face, but looked significantly toward the other members of the company.

"Whatever you have to say should be heard by all," declared Uncle John,

answering the look.

"Perhaps you are right, Mr. Merrick, and all present are entitled to an explanation," answered the young man, slowly. "I may have been foolish, but I believe I have done nothing that I need be ashamed of.

Fortunately, there is now no further reason for concealment on my part, and in listening to my explanation I hope you will be as considerate as possible."

They were attentive enough, by this time, and every eye was turned, not unkindly, upon the youth who had so long been an enigma to them all--except, perhaps, to Louise.

"I am an American by birth, and my name is Arthur Weldon."

In the pause that followed Uncle John gave a soft whistle and Patsy laughed outright, to the undisguised indignation of Louise.

"Years ago," resumed the youth, "my father, who was a rich man, made a trip to Sicily and, although I did not know this until recently, was seized by brigands and imprisoned in the hidden valley we have just left. There he fell in love with a beautiful girl who was the daughter of the female brigand known as the Duchess of Alcanta, and who assisted him to escape and then married him. It was a pretty romance at the time, but when my father had taken his bride home to New York and became immersed in the details of his business, his love grew cold and he began

to neglect his wife cruelly. He became a railway president and amassed a great fortune, but was not so successful a husband as he was a financier. The result was that the Sicilian girl, after some years of unhappiness and suffering, deserted him and returned to her own country, leaving her child, then three years old, behind her. To be frank with you, it was said at the time that my mother's mind had become unbalanced, or she would not have abandoned me to the care of a loveless father, but I prefer to think that she had come to hate her husband so bitterly that she could have no love for his child or else she feared that her terrible mother would kill me if I came into her power. Her flight mattered little to my father, except that it made him more stern and tyrannical toward me. He saw me very seldom and confided my education to servants. So I grew up practically unloved and uncared for, and when the proper time arrived I was sent to college. My father now gave me an ample allowance, and at the close of my college career called me into his office and ordered me to enter the employ of the railway company. I objected to this. I did not like the business and had other plans for my future. But he was stubborn and dictatorial, and when I continued unsubmitive he threatened to cast me off entirely and leave his fortune to charity, since he had no other near relatives. He must have thought better of this decision afterward, for he gave me a year to decide whether or not I would obey him. At the end of that time, he declared, I would become either a pauper or his heir, at my option.

"It was during this year that I formed the acquaintance of your niece, Miss Merrick, and grew to love her devotedly. Louise returned my

affection, but her mother, learning of my quarrel with my father, refused to sanction our engagement until I was acknowledged his heir. I was forbidden her house, but naturally we met elsewhere, and when I knew she was going to Europe with you, sir, who had never seen me, we hit upon what we thought was a happy and innocent plan to avoid the long separation. I decided to go to Europe also, and without you or your other nieces suspecting, my identity, attach myself to your party and enjoy the society of Louise while she remained abroad. So I followed you on the next ship and met you at Sorrento, where I introduced myself as Count Ferralti--a name we had agreed I should assume before we parted in America.

"The rest of my story you know. My father was killed in an accident on his own railroad, and I received the news while we were prisoners of the brigand, whom I discovered to be my uncle, but who had no mercy upon me because of the relationship. To-night, on my return here, I found a letter from my father's attorney, forwarded from my bankers in Paris. Through my father's sudden death I have inherited all his wealth, as he had no time to alter his will. Therefore Mrs. Merrick's objection to me is now removed, and Louise has never cared whether I had a penny or not."

He halted, as if not knowing what more to say, and the little group of listeners remained quiet because it seemed that no remark from them was necessary. Young Weldon, however, was ill at ease, and after hitching nervously in his chair he addressed Uncle John in these words:

"Sir, you are the young lady's guardian for the present, as she is in your charge. I therefore ask your consent to our formal engagement."

"Not any," said Uncle John, decidedly. "I'll sanction no engagement of any children on this trip. You are wrong in supposing I am Louise's guardian--I'm just her chum and uncle. It's like cradle-snatching to want to marry a girl of sixteen, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself, for you can't be much more than twenty-one yourself. While Louise is in my care I won't have any entanglements of any sort, so you'll have to wait till you get home and settle the business with her mother."

"Very wise and proper, sir," said Mr. Watson, nodding gravely.

Louise's cheeks were flaming.

"Do you intend to drive Arthur away, Uncle?" she asked.

"Why should I, my dear? except that you've both taken me for a blind old idiot and tried to deceive me. Let the boy stay with us, if he wants to, but he'll have to cut out all love-making and double-dealing from this time on--or I'll take you home in double-quick time."

The young man seemed to resent the indictment.

"The deception seemed necessary at the time, sir," he said, "and you must not forget the old adage that 'all's fair in love and war.' But I beg that you will forgive us both and overlook our fault, if fault it was. Hereafter it is our desire to be perfectly frank with you in all things."

That was a good way to disarm Uncle John's anger, and the result was immediately apparent.

"Very good," said the old gentleman; "if you are proper and obedient children I've no objection to your being together. I rather like you, Arthur Weldon, and most of your failings are due to the foolishness of youth. But you've got to acquire dignity now, for you have suddenly become a man of consequence in the world. Don't think you've got to marry every girl that attracts you by her pretty face. This devotion to Louise may be 'puppy-love,' after all, and--"

"Oh, Uncle!" came a chorus of protest.

"What, you rascals! are you encouraging this desperate fol-de-rol?"

"You are too severe, Uncle John," said Patsy, smiling. "The trouble with you is that you've never been in love yourself."

"Never been in love!" He beamed upon the three girls with devotion written all over his round, jolly face.

"Then you're jealous," said Kenneth. "Give the poor kids a fair show, Uncle John."

"All right, I will. Arthur, my lad, join our happy family as one of my kidlets, and love us all--but no one in particular. Eh? Until we get home again, you know. We've started out to have the time of our lives, and we're getting it in chunks--eh, girls?"

"We certainly are, Uncle John!" Another chorus.

"Well, what do you say, Arthur Weldon?"

"Perhaps you are right, sir," answered the young man. "And, anyway, I am deeply grateful for your kindness. I fear I must return home in a couple of weeks, to look after business matters; but while I remain with you I shall try to conduct myself as you wish."

"That sounds proper. Is it satisfactory to you, Louise?"

"Yes, Uncle."

"Then we've settled Cupid--for a time, anyway. And now, my dears, I think we have all had enough of Taormina. Where shall we go next?"