

CHAPTER VI

UNDER A CLOUD

"After all," said Uncle John, next morning, "we may consider ourselves very lucky. Your parents might have come to Naples a hundred times, my dears, and your children may come a hundred times more, and yet never see the sights that have greeted us on our arrival. If the confounded old hill was bound to spout, it did the fair thing by spouting when we were around. Eh, Patsy?"

"I quite agree with you," said the girl. "I wouldn't have missed it for anything--if it really had to behave so."

"But you'll pay for it!" growled Signor Valdi, who had overheard these remarks. "You will pay for it with a thousand discomforts--and I'm glad that is so. Vesuvio is hell let loose; and it amuses you. Hundreds are lying dead and crushed; and you are lucky to be here. Listen," he dropped his voice to a whisper: "if these Neapolitans could see the rejoicing in my heart, they would kill me. And you? Pah! you are no better. You also rejoice--and they will welcome you to Naples. I have advice. Do not go on shore. It is useless."

They were all startled by this strange speech, and the reproof it conveyed made them a trifle uncomfortable; but Uncle John whispered that

the man was mad, and to pay no attention to him.

Although ashes still fell softly upon the ship the day had somewhat lightened the gloom and they could see from deck the dim outlines of the shore. A crowd of boats presently swarmed around them, their occupants eagerly clamoring for passengers to go ashore, or offering fruits, flowers and souvenirs to any who might be induced to purchase. Their indifference to their own and their city's danger was astonishing. It was their custom to greet arriving steamers in this way, for by this means they gained a livelihood. Nothing short of absolute destruction seemed able to interfere with their established occupations.

A steam tender also came alongside, and after a cordial farewell to the ship's officers and their travelling acquaintances, Uncle John placed his nieces and their baggage aboard the tender, which shortly deposited them safely upon the dock.

Perhaps a lot of passengers more dismal looking never before landed on the beautiful shores of Naples--beautiful no longer, but presenting an appearance gray and grewsome. Ashes were ankle deep in the streets--a fine, flour-like dust that clung to your clothing, filled your eyes and lungs and seemed to penetrate everywhere. The foliage of the trees and shrubbery drooped under its load and had turned from green to the all-pervading gray. The grass was covered; the cornices and balconies of the houses were banked with ashes.

"Bless me!" said Uncle John. "It's as bad as Pompey, or whatever that city was called that was buried in the Bible days."

"Oh, not quite, Uncle," answered Patsy, in her cheery voice; "but it may be, before Vesuvius is satisfied."

"It is certainly bad enough," observed Louise, pouting as she marked the destruction of her pretty cloak by the grimy deposit that was fast changing its color and texture.

"Well, let us get under shelter as soon as possible," said Uncle John.

The outlines of a carriage were visible a short distance away. He walked up to the driver and said:

"We want to go to a hotel."

The man paid no attention.

"Ask him how much he charges, Uncle. You know you mustn't take a cab in Naples without bargaining."

"Why not?"

"The driver will swindle you."

"I'll risk that," he answered. "Just now we're lucky if we get a carriage at all." He reached up and prodded the jehu in the ribs with his cane. "How much to the Hotel Vesuvius?" he demanded, loudly.

The man woke up and flourished his whip, at the same time bursting into a flood of Italian.

The girls listened carefully. They had been trying to study Italian from a small book Beth had bought entitled "Italian in Three Weeks without a Master," but not a word the driver of the carriage said seemed to have occurred in the vocabulary of the book. He repeated "Vesuvio" many times, however, with scornful, angry or imploring intonations, and Louise finally said:

"He thinks you want to go to the volcano, Uncle. The hotel is the Vesuve, not the Vesuvius."

"What's the difference?"

"I don't know."

"All right; you girls just hop in, and leave the rest to me."

He tumbled them all into the vehicle, bag and baggage, and then said sternly to the driver:

"Ho-tel Ve-suve--Ve-suve--ho-tel Ve-suve! Drive there darned quick, or I'll break your confounded neck."

The carriage started. It plowed its way jerkily through the dust-laden streets and finally stopped at an imposing looking structure. The day was growing darker, and an electric lamp burned before the entrance. But no one came out to receive them.

Uncle John climbed out and read the sign. "Hotel du Vesuve." It was the establishment he had been advised to stop at while in Naples. He compared the sign with a card which he drew from his pocket, and knew that he had made no mistake.

Entering the spacious lobby, he found it deserted. In the office a man was hastily making a package of some books and papers and did not respond or even look up when spoken to. At the concierge's desk a big, whiskered man sat staring straight ahead of him with a look of abject terror in his eyes.

"Good morning," said Uncle John. "Fine day, isn't it?"

"Did you hear it?" whispered the concierge, as a dull boom, like that of a distant cannon, made the windows rattle in their casements.

"Of course," replied Mr. Merrick, carelessly. "Old Vesuve seems on a rampage. But never mind that now. We've just come from America, where

the mountains are more polite, and we're going to stop at your hotel."

The concierge's eyes wandered from the man to the three girls who had entered and grouped themselves behind him. Then they fell upon the driver of the carriage, who burst into a torrent of vociferous but wholly unintelligible exclamations which Uncle John declared "must be an excuse--and a mighty poor one--for talking."

The whiskered man, whose cap was elaborately embroidered in gold with the words "Hotel du Vesuve," seemed to understand the driver. He sighed drearily and said to Mr. Merrick:

"You must pay him thirty lira."

"How much is that?"

"Six dollars."

"Not by a jugfull!"

"You made no bargain."

"I couldn't. He can't talk."

"He claims it is you who cannot talk."

"What!"

"And prices are advanced during these awful days. What does it matter? Your money will do you no good when we are all buried deep in ash and scoria."

The big man shuddered at this gloomy picture, and added, listlessly:

"You'll have to pay."

Uncle John paid, but the driver wouldn't accept American money. The disconsolate concierge would, though. He unlocked a drawer, put the six dollars into one section and drew from another two ten-lira notes. The driver took them, bowed respectfully to the whiskered man, shot a broadside of invective Italian at the unconscious Americans, and left the hotel.

"How about rooms?" asked Uncle John.

"Take any you please," answered the concierge. "All our guests are gone but two--two mad Americans like yourselves. The servants are also gone; the chef has gone; the elevator conductors are gone. If you stay you'll have to walk up."

"Where have they all gone?" asked Uncle John, wonderingly.

"Fled, sir; fled to escape destruction. They remember Pompeii. Only

Signor Floriano, the proprietor, and myself are left. We stick to the last. We are brave."

"So I see. Now, look here, my manly hero. It's possible we shall all live through it; I'll bet you a thousand to ten that we do. And then you'll be glad to realize you've pocketed a little more American money. Come out of that box and show us some rooms, and I'll help to build up your fortune."

The concierge obeyed. Even the horrors of the situation could not eliminate from his carefully trained nature that desire to accumulate which is the prime qualification of his profession. The Americans walked up one flight and found spacious rooms on the first floor, of which they immediately took possession.

"Send for our trunks," said Mr. Merrick; and the man consented to do so provided he could secure a proper vehicle.

"You will be obliged to pay high for it," he warned; "but that will not matter. To witness the destruction of our beautiful Naples is an unusual sight. It will be worth your money."

"We'll settle that in the dim hereafter," replied Uncle John. "You get the trunks, and I'll take care of the finances."

When the concierge had retired the girls began to stuff newspapers into

the cracks of the windows of their sitting room, where the fine ash was sifting in and forming little drifts several inches in thickness. Also the atmosphere of the room was filled with impalpable particles of dust, which rendered breathing oppressive and unpleasant.

Uncle John watched them for a time, and his brow clouded.

"See here, girls," he exclaimed; "let's hold a council of war. Do you suppose we are in any real danger?"

They grouped around him with eager interest.

"It's something new to be in danger, and rather exciting, don't you think?" said Beth. "But perhaps we're as safe as we would be at home."

"Once," said Louise, slowly, "there was a great eruption of Vesuvius which destroyed the cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii. Many of the inhabitants were buried alive. Perhaps they thought there was no real danger."

Uncle John scratched his head reflectively.

"I take it," he observed, "that the moral of your story is to light out while we have the chance."

"Not necessarily," observed the girl, smiling at his perplexity. "It is

likewise true that many other eruptions have occurred, when little damage was done."

"Forewarned is forearmed," declared Patsy. "Naples isn't buried more than six inches in ashes, as yet, and it will take days for them to reach to our windows, provided they're falling at the same rate they do now. I don't see any use of getting scared before to-morrow, anyhow."

"It's a big hill," said Uncle John, gravely, "and I've no right to take foolish chances with three girls on my hands."

"I'm not frightened, Uncle John."

"Nor I."

"Nor I, the least bit."

"Everyone has left the hotel but ourselves," said he.

"How sorry they will be, afterward," remarked Beth.

He looked at them admiringly, and kissed each one.

"You stay in this room and don't move a peg till I get back," he enjoined them; "I'm going out to look over the situation."