

## CHAPTER VII

### A FRIEND IN NEED

Some of Mr. Merrick's business friends in New York, hearing of his proposed trip, had given him letters of introduction to people in various European cities. He had accepted them--quite a bunch, altogether--but had firmly resolved not to use them. Neither he nor the nieces cared to make superficial acquaintances during their wanderings. Yet Uncle John chanced to remember that one of these letters was to a certain Colonel Angeli of the Twelfth Italian Regiment, occupying the barracks on the Pizzofalcone hill at Naples. This introduction, tendered by a relative of the Colonel's American wife, was now reposing in Mr. Merrick's pocket, and he promptly decided to make use of it in order to obtain expert advice as to the wisdom of remaining in the stricken city.

Enquiring his way from the still dazed concierge, he found that the Pizzofalcone barracks were just behind the hotel but several hundred feet above it; so he turned up the Strada St. Lucia and soon came upon the narrow lane that wound upward to the fortifications. It was a long and tedious climb in the semi-darkness caused by the steady fall of ashes, and at intervals the detonations from Vesuvius shook the huge rock and made its massive bulk seem insecure. But the little man persevered, and finally with sweating brow arrived at the barracks.

A soldier carried in the letter to his colonel and presently returned to usher Uncle John through the vast building, up a flight of steps, and so to a large covered balcony suspended many hundred feet above the Via Partenope, where the hotel was situated.

Here was seated a group of officers, watching intently the cloud that marked the location of the volcano. Colonel Angeli, big and bluff, his uniform gorgeous, his dark, heavy moustaches carefully waxed, his handsome face as ingenuous and merry as a schoolboy's, greeted the American with a gracious courtesy that made Uncle John feel quite at his ease. When he heard of the nieces the Italian made a grimace and then laughed.

"I am despairing, signore," said he, in English sufficiently strangulated to be amusing but nevertheless quite comprehensible, "that you and the sweet signorini are to see our lovely Naples under tribulations so very great. But yesterday, in all the world is no city so enchanting, so brilliant, so gay. To-day--look! is it not horrible? Vesuvio is sick, and Naples mourns until the tyrant is well again."

"But the danger," said Uncle John. "What do you think of the wisdom of our staying here? Is it safe to keep my girls in Naples during this eruption?"

"Ah! Why not? This very morning the mountain asunder burst, and we who love our people dread the news of devastation we shall hear. From the

observatory, where His Majesty's faithful servant still remains, come telegrams that the great pebbles--what we call scoria--have ruined Ottajano and San Guiseppe. Perhaps they are overwhelmed. But the beast has vomited; he will feel better now, and ever become more quiet."

"I suppose," remarked Mr. Merrick, thoughtfully, "that no one knows exactly what the blamed hill may do next. I don't like to take chances with three girls on my hands. They are a valuable lot, Colonel, and worth saving."

The boyish Italian instantly looked grave. Then he led Uncle John away from the others, although doubtless he was the only officer present able to speak or understand English, and said to him:

"Where are you living?"

"At the hotel named after your sick mountain--the Vesuve."

"Very good. In the bay, not distant from your hotel, lies a government launch that is under my command. At my home in the Viala Elena are a wife and two children, who, should danger that is serious arise, will be put by my soldiers on the launch, to carry them to safety. Admirable, is it not?"

"Very good arrangement," said Uncle John.

"It renders me content to know that in any difficulty they cannot be hurt. I am not scare, myself, but it is pleasant to know I have what you call the side that is safe. From my American wife I have many of your excellent speech figures. But now! The launch is big. Remain happy in Naples--happy as Vesuvio will let you--and watch his vast, his gigantic exhibition. If danger come, you all enter my launch and be saved. If no danger, you have a marvelous experience." The serious look glided from his face, and was replaced by a smile as bright as before.

"Thank you very much," responded Uncle John, gratefully. "I shall go back to the girls well satisfied."

"Make the signorini stay in to-day," warned the colonel. "It is bad, just now, and so black one can nothing at all observe. To-morrow it will be better, and all can go without. I will see you myself, then, and tell you what to do."

Then he insisted that Uncle John clear his parched throat with a glass of vermouth--a harmless drink of which all Italians are very fond--and sent him away much refreshed in body and mind.

He made his way through the ashy rain back to the hotel. People were holding umbrellas over their heads and plodding through the dust with seeming unconcern. At one corner a street singer was warbling, stopping frequently to cough the lava dust from his throat or shake it from his beloved mandolin. A procession of peasants passed, chanting slowly and

solemnly a religious hymn. At the head of the column was borne aloft a gilded statuette of the Virgin, and although Uncle John did not know it, these simple folks were trusting in the sacred image to avert further disaster from the angry mountain.

On arriving home Mr. Merrick told the girls with great elation of his new friend, and how they were to be taken aboard the launch in case of emergency.

"But how will we know when danger threatens?" asked Louise.

While Uncle John tried to think of an answer to this puzzling query someone knocked upon the door. The concierge was standing in the passage and beside him was a soldier in uniform, a natty cock's plume upon his beaver hat and a short carbine over his arm.

"A guard from Colonel Angeli, Signor," said the concierge, respectfully--the first respectful tone he had yet employed.

The soldier took off his hat with a flourish, and bowed low.

"He is to remain in the hotel, sir, yet will not disturb you in any way," continued the whiskered one. "But should he approach you at any time and beckon you to follow him, do so at once, and without hesitation. It is Colonel Angeli's wish. You are in the charge of this brave man, who will watch over your welfare."

"That settles it, my dears," said Uncle John, cheerfully, when the soldier and the concierge had withdrawn. "This Italian friend doesn't do things by halves, and I take it we are perfectly safe from this time on."