

CHAPTER VIII

ACROSS THE BAY

Tom Horton called an hour later. He was in despair because his party had decided to leave Naples for Rome, and he feared Beth would be engulfed by the volcano unless he was present to protect her.

"Mr. Merrick," said the boy, earnestly, "you'll take good care of Miss De Graf, sir, won't you? We both live in Ohio, you know, and we've just got acquainted; and--and I'd like to see her again, some time, if she escapes."

Uncle John's eyes twinkled, but he drew a long face.

"My dear Tom," he said, "don't ask me to take care of anyone--please don't! I brought these girls along to take care of me--three of 'em, sir--and they've got to do their duty. Don't you worry about the girls; just you worry about me."

That was not much consolation for the poor fellow, but he could do nothing more than wring their hands--Beth's twice, by mistake--and wish them good luck before he hurried away to rejoin his family.

"I'm sorry to see him go," said Beth, honestly. "Tom is a nice boy."

"Quite right," agreed Uncle John. "I hope we shall meet no worse fellows than Tom Horton."

At noon they were served a modest luncheon in their rooms, for Signor Floriano, having sent his important papers to a place of safety, had resolved to stick to his hotel and do his duty by any guests that chose to remain with him in defiance of the existent conditions. He had succeeded in retaining a few servants who had more courage than those that had stampeded at the first alarm, and while the hotel service for the next few days was very inadequate, no one was liable to suffer any great privation.

During the afternoon the gloom grew denser than before, while thicker than ever fell the rain of ashes. This was the worst day Naples experienced during the great eruption, and Uncle John and his nieces were content to keep their rooms and live in the glare of electric lights. Owing to their wise precautions to keep out the heavily laden air they breathed as little lava dust into their lungs as any people, perhaps, in the city; but to escape all was impossible. Their eyes and throats became more or less inflamed by the floating atoms, and the girls declared they felt as if they were sealed up in a tomb.

"Well, my chickens, how do you like being abroad, and actually in Europe?" enquired Uncle John, cheerfully.

Beth and Patsy smiled at him, but Louise looked up from the Baedeker she was studying and replied:

"It's simply delightful, Uncle, and I'm glad we happened here during this splendid eruption of Vesuvius. Only--only--"

"Only what, my dear?"

"Only it is such hard work to keep clean," answered his dainty niece.

"Even the water is full of lava, and I'm sure my face looks like a chimney-sweep's."

"And you, Beth?"

"I don't like it, Uncle. I'm sure I'd prefer Naples in sunshine, although this is an experience we can brag about when we get home."

"That is the idea, exactly," said Louise, "and the only thing that reconciles me to the discomforts. Thousands see Naples in sunshine, but few can boast seeing Vesuvius in eruption. It will give us considerable prestige when we return home."

"Ah, that is why I selected this time to bring you here," declared Uncle John, with a comical wink. "I ordered the eruption before I left home, and I must say they've been very prompt about it, and done the thing up brown. Eh, Patsy?"

"Right you are, Uncle. But you might tell 'em to turn off the eruption now, because we've had enough."

"Don't like Eu-rope, eh?"

"Why, if I thought all Europe was surrounded by volcanoes, I'd go home at once, if I had to walk. But the geographies don't mention many of these spouters, so we may as well stick out our present experience and hope the rest of the continent will behave better. The Major'll be worried to death when he hears of this."

"I've sent him a cable," said Uncle John.

"What did you say?" asked Patsy, eagerly.

"All safe and well and enjoying the fireworks."

"I'm glad you did that," replied the girl, deeply grateful at this evidence of thoughtfulness. "It's bad enough for the Major to have me away, without making him worry, into the bargain."

"Well, no one is likely to worry about me," said Beth, philosophically.

"Mother seldom reads the papers, except to get the society news," remarked Louise. "I doubt if she'll hear of the eruption, unless the

Major happens to tell her."

"I've cabled them all," said Uncle John. "They're entitled to know that their kidiwinkles are in good shape."

The evening was a tedious one, although they tried to enliven it with a game of bridge, in which Uncle John and Louise were quite proficient and the others dreadfully incompetent. Once in a while the volcano thundered a deep detonation that caused the windows to shiver, but the Americans were getting used to the sound and paid little heed to it.

In the morning the wind had shifted, and although the air was still full of dust all near-by objects were clearly visible and even the outline of Vesuvius could be seen sending skyward its pillar of black smoke.

Colonel Angeli appeared soon after breakfast, his uniform fresh and bright and his boyish face beaming as pleasantly as ever.

"Vesuvio is better," said he, "but the rascal has badly acted and done much harm to our poor people. Like Herculaneum, our Boscatrecase is covered with lava; like Pompeii our Ottajano is buried in ashes. Let me advise you. To-day go to Sorrento, and there stay for a time, until we can the dust brush from our streets and prepare to welcome you with the comfort more serene. I must myself ride to the villages that are suffering. My men are already gone, with the Red-Cross corps, to succor whom they can. I will send to you word when you may return. Just now,

should you stay, you will be able to see nothing at all."

"I believe that is wise counsel," replied Uncle John.

"Sorrento has no ashes," continued the Colonel, "and from there you may watch the volcano better than from Naples. To-day come the Duke and Duchess d'Aosta to render assistance to the homeless and hungry; to-morrow His Majesty the King will be here to discover what damage has been caused. Alas! we have no sackcloth, but we are in ashes. I trust you will pardon my poor Naples for her present inhospitality."

"Sure thing," said Uncle John. "The city may be under a cloud, but her people are the right stuff, and we are greatly obliged to you for all your kindness to us."

"But that is so little!" said the colonel, deprecatingly.

They decided to leave their heavy baggage at the Hotel du Vesuve, and carried only their suit-cases and light luggage aboard the little steamer that was bound across the bay for Sorrento. The decks were thronged with people as eager to get away from the stricken city as were our friends, and Uncle John was only enabled to secure seats for his girls by bribing a steward so heavily that even that modern brigand was amazed at his good fortune.

The ride was short but very interesting, for they passed under the

shadow of the smoking mountain and came into a fresh, sweet atmosphere that was guiltless of a speck of the disagreeable lava dust that had so long annoyed them. The high bluffs of Sorrento, with their picturesque villas and big hotels, seemed traced in burnished silver by the strong sunshine, and every member of Uncle John's party was glad that Colonel Angeli had suggested this pleasant change of condition.

Small boats took them ashore and an elevator carried them swiftly to the top of the cliff and deposited them on the terrace of the Victoria, a beautiful inn that nestled in a garden brilliant with splendid flowers and shrubbery. Here they speedily established themselves, preparing to enjoy their first real experience of "Sunny Italy."