

CHAPTER IX

COUNT FERRALTI

At dinner it was announced that the famous Tarantella would be danced in the lower hall of the hotel at nine o'clock, and the girls told Uncle John that they must not miss this famous sight, which is one of the most unique in Sorrento, or indeed in all Italy.

As they entered the pretty, circular hall devoted to the dance Louise gave a start of surprise. A goodly audience had already assembled in the room, and among them the girl seemed to recognize an acquaintance, for after a brief hesitation she advanced and placed her hand in that of a gentleman who had risen on her entrance and hastened toward her.

He was a nice looking young fellow, Beth thought, and had a foreign and quite distinguished air.

Presently Louise turned with cheeks somewhat flushed and brought the gentleman to her party, introducing him to Uncle John and her cousins as Count Ferralti, whom she had once met in New York while he was on a visit to America.

The Count twirled his small and slender moustaches in a way that Patsy thought affected, and said in excellent English:

"It delights me to meet Mr. Merrick and the young ladies. May I express a hope that you are pleased with my beautiful country?"

"Are you Italian?" asked Uncle John, regarding the young man critically.

"Surely, Mr. Merrick. But I have resided much in New York, and may well claim to be an adopted son of your great city."

"New York adopts a good many," said Uncle John, drily. "It has even been thoughtless enough to adopt me."

The dancers entered at that moment and the Americans were forced to seat themselves hastily so as not to obstruct the view of others. Count Ferralti found a place beside Louise, but seemed to have little to say to her during the course of the entertainment.

The dances were unique and graceful, being executed by a troupe of laughing peasants dressed in native costume, who seemed very proud of their accomplishment and anxious to please the throng of tourists present. The Tarantella originated in Ischia, but Sorrento and Capri have the best dancers.

Afterward Uncle John and his nieces stood upon the terrace and watched the volcano rolling its dense clouds, mingled with sparks of red-hot scoria, toward the sky. The Count clung to Louise's side, but also tried

to make himself agreeable to her cousins. In their rooms that night Patsy told Beth that the young foreigner was "too highfalutin' to suit her," and Beth replied that his manners were so like those of their Cousin Louise that the two ought to get along nicely together.

Uncle John liked his nieces to make friends, and encouraged young men generally to meet them; but there was something in the appearance of this callow Italian nobleman that stamped his character as artificial and insincere. He resolved to find out something about his antecedents before he permitted the young fellow to establish friendly relations with his girls.

Next morning after breakfast he wandered through the lobby and paused at the little office, where he discovered that the proprietor of this hotel was a brother of that Floriano who managed the Hotel du Vesuve. That gave him an excuse to talk with the man, who spoke very good English and was exceedingly courteous to his guests--especially when they were American.

"I see you have Count Ferralti with you," remarked Uncle John.

"Whom, sir?"

"Ferralti--Count Ferralti. The young man standing by the window, yonder."

"I--I did not know," he said, hesitatingly. "The gentleman arrived last evening, and I had not yet learned his name. Let me see," he turned to his list of guests, who register by card and not in a book, and continued: "Ah, yes; he has given his name as Ferralti, but added no title. A count, did you say?"

"Yes," replied Uncle John.

The proprietor looked curiously toward the young man, whose back only was visible. Then he remarked that the eruption of Vesuvius was waning and the trouble nearly over for this time.

"Are the Ferraltis a good family?" asked Uncle John, abruptly.

"That I cannot tell you, Signor Merrick."

"Oh. Perhaps you know little about the nobility of your country."

"I! I know little of the nobility!" answered Floriano, indignantly. "My dear signor, there is no man better posted as to our nobility in all Italy."

"Yet you say you don't know the Ferralti family."

The proprietor reached for a book that lay above his desk.

"Observe, signor. Here is our record of nobility. It is the same as the 'Blue Book' or the 'Peerage' of England. Either fortunately or unfortunately--I cannot say--you have no need of such a book in America."

He turned the pages and ran his finger down the line of "Fs."

"Find me, if you can, a Count Ferralti in the list."

Uncle John looked. He put on his glasses and looked again. The name of Ferralti was no place in the record.

"Then there is no such count, Signor Floriano."

"And no such noble family, Signor Merrick."

Uncle John whistled softly and walked away to the window. The young man greeted him with a smile and a bow.

"I misunderstood your name last evening," he said. "I thought you were Count Ferralti."

"And that is right, sir," was the prompt reply. "Allow me to offer you my card."

Uncle John took the card and read:

"CONTE LEONARDI FERRALTI,
Milano, Italia."

He carefully placed the card in his pocket-book.

"Thank you," said he. "It's a fine morning, Count."

"Charming, Mr. Merrick."

Uncle John walked away. He was glad that he had not suspected the young man unjustly. When an imposture is unmasked it is no longer dangerous.

He joined his nieces, who were all busily engaged in writing letters home, and remarked, casually:

"You've been deceived in your Italian friend, Louise. He is neither a count nor of noble family, although I suppose when you met him in New York he had an object in posing as a titled aristocrat."

The girl paused, examining the point of her pen thoughtfully.

"Are you sure, Uncle John?"

"Quite sure, my dear. I've just been through the list of Italian counts, and his name is not there. Floriano, the proprietor, who knows every

aristocrat in Italy, has never before heard of him."

"How singular!" exclaimed Louise. "I wonder why he has tried to deceive us."

"Oh, the world is full of impostors; but when you are on to their game they are quite harmless. Of course we won't encourage this young man in any way. It will be better to avoid him."

"He--he seems very nice and gentlemanly," said Louise with hesitation.

The other girls exchanged glances, but made no remark. Uncle John hardly knew what to say further. He felt he was in an awkward position, for Louise was the most experienced in worldly ways of his three nieces and he had no desire to pose as a stern guardian or to deprive his girls of any passing pleasure they might enjoy. Moreover, Louise being in love with that young Weldon her mother so strongly objected to, she would not be likely to care much for this Italian fellow, and Mrs. Merrick had enjoined him to keep her daughter's mind from dwelling on her "entanglement."

"Oh, well, my dear," he said to her, "you must act as you see fit. I do not imagine we shall see much of this young man, in any event, and now that you are well aware of the fact that he is sailing under false colors, you will know how to handle him better than I can advise you."

"I shall be very careful," said Louise slowly, as she resumed her writing.

"Well then, girls, what do you say to a stroll around the village?" asked their uncle. "I'm told it's a proper place to buy silk stockings and inlaid wood-work. They come assorted, I suppose."

Beth and Patsy jumped up with alacrity, but Louise pleaded that she had several more letters to write; so the others left her and passed the rest of the forenoon in rummaging among the quaint shops of Sorrento, staring at the statue of Tasso, and enjoying the street scenes so vividly opposed to those of America. It was almost their first glimpse of foreign manners and customs. In Naples they had as yet seen nothing but darkness and falling ashes.