

CHAPTER XI

THE EAGLE SCREAMS

Despite the glories of the Amalfi road our tourists decided it was more pleasant to loiter around Sorrento for a time than to undertake further excursions. The mornings and evenings were chill, but during the middle of the day the air was warm and delicious; so the girls carried their books and fancy-work into the beautiful gardens or wandered lazily through the high-walled lanes that shut in the villas and orange groves. Sometimes they found a gate open, and were welcomed to the orchards and permitted to pluck freely the fragrant and rich flavored fruit, which is excelled in no other section of the south country. Also Uncle John, with Beth and Patsy, frequented the shops of the wood-workers and watched their delicate and busy fingers inlaying the various colored woods; but Louise mostly kept to the garden, where Count Ferralti, being a semi-invalid, was content to sit by her side and amuse her.

In spite of her uncle's discovery of the false position assumed by this young man, Louise seemed to like his attentions and to approve his evident admiration for her. His ways might be affected and effeminate and his conversational powers indifferent; but his bandaged wrist was a constant reminder to all the nieces that he possessed courage and ready wit, and it was but natural that he became more interesting to them because just now he was to an extent helpless, and his crippled hand had

been acquired in their service.

Uncle John watched the young fellow shrewdly, but could discover little harm in him except his attempt to deceive them in regard to his name and position. Yet in his mature eyes there was not much about Ferralti to arouse admiration, and the little man considered his girls too sensible to be greatly impressed by this youthful Italian's personality. So he allowed him to sit with his nieces in the gardens as much as he pleased, believing it would be ungrateful to deprive the count of that harmless recreation.

"A reg'lar chaperone might think differently," he reflected; "but thank goodness there are no dragons swimming in our cup of happiness."

One day they devoted to Capri and the Blue Grotto, and afterward they lunched at the Quisisana and passed the afternoon in the town. But the charms of Sorrento were too great for Capri to win their allegiance, and they were glad to get back to their quaint town and delightful gardens again.

The week passed all too swiftly, and then came a letter from Colonel Angeli telling them to return to Naples and witness the results of the eruption. This they decided to do, and bidding good-bye to Signor Floriano and his excellent hotel they steamed across the bay and found the "Vesuve" a vastly different hostelry from the dismal place they had left in their flight from Naples. It was now teeming with life, for, all

danger being past, the tourists had flocked to the city in droves. The town was still covered with ashes, but under the brilliant sunshine it did not look as gloomy as one might imagine, and already thousands of carts were busily gathering the dust from the streets and dumping it in the waters of the bay. It would require months of hard work, though, before Naples could regain a semblance of its former beauty.

Their friend the Colonel personally accompanied them to the towns that had suffered the most from the eruption. At Boscatrecasa they walked over the great beds of lava that had demolished the town--banks of cinders looking like lumps of pumice stone and massed from twenty to thirty feet in thickness throughout the valley. The lava was still so hot that it was liable to blister the soles of their feet unless they kept constantly moving. It would be many more days before the interior of the mass became cold.

Through the forlorn, dust-covered vineyards they drove to San Guiseppe, where a church roof had fallen in and killed one hundred and forty people, maiming many more. The Red-Cross tents were pitched in the streets and the whole town was one vast hospital. Ottajano, a little nearer to the volcano, had been buried in scoria, and nine-tenths of the roofs had fallen in, rendering the dwellings untenable.

From here a clear view of Mt. Vesuvius could be obtained. The shape of the mountain had greatly altered and the cone had lost sixty-five feet of its altitude. But when one gazed upon the enormous bulk of volcanic

deposit that littered the country for miles around, it seemed to equal a dozen mountains the size of Vesuvius. The marvel was that so much ashes and cinders could come from a single crater in so short a period.

Naples was cleaning house, but slowly and listlessly. The people seemed as cheerful and light-hearted as ever. The volcano was one of their crosses, and they bore it patiently. The theatres would remain closed for some weeks to come, but the great Museo Nazionale was open, and Uncle John and his nieces were much interested in the bronze and marble statuary that here form the greatest single collection in all the world.

It was at the Museum that Mr. Merrick was arrested for the first time in his life, an experience he never afterward forgot.

Bad money is so common in Naples that Uncle John never accepted any change from anyone, but obtained all his silver coins and notes directly from the Banca Commerciale Italiana, a government institution. One morning he drove with the girls to the museum and paid the cabman a lira, but before he could ascend the steps the man was after him and holding out a leaden coin, claiming that his fare had given him bad money and must exchange it for good. This is so common a method of swindling that Uncle John paid no heed to the demands of the cabman until one of the Guard Municipale, in his uniform of dark blue with yellow buttons and cap, placed a restraining hand upon the American's shoulder.

Uncle John angrily shook him off, but the man persisted, and an interpreter employed by the museum stepped forward and explained that unless the cabman was given a good coin in exchange for the bad one the garde would be obliged to take him before a commissionaire, or magistrate.

"But I gave him a good coin--a lira direct from the bank," declared Uncle John.

"He exhibits a bad one," returned the interpreter, calmly.

"He's a swindler!"

"He is a citizen of Naples, and entitled to a just payment," said the other, shrugging his shoulders.

"You are all leagued together," said Uncle John, indignantly. "But you will get no more money out of me, I promise you."

The result was that the stubborn American was placed under arrest. Leaving the girls at the museum in charge of Ferralti, who had made no attempt to interfere in the dispute but implored Uncle John to pay and avoid trouble, the angry prisoner was placed in the same cab he had arrived in and, with the officer seated beside him, was publicly driven to the office of the magistrate.

This official understood no English, but he glowered and frowned fiercely when the American was brought before him. The guard and the cabman stood with bowed heads and in low tones preferred the charge against the prisoner; but Uncle John swaggered up to the desk and pounded his clenched fist upon it while he roared a defiance of Italian injustice and threatened to "bring over a few war-ships and blow Naples into kingdom come!"

The magistrate was startled, and ordered the prisoner searched for concealed weapons. Uncle John doubled his fists and dared the guard to touch him.

Then the cabman was dispatched for someone who could speak English, and when an interpreter arrived the American told him to send for the United States consul and also to inform the magistrate that nothing but war between America and Italy could wipe out the affront that had been thrust upon him.

The magistrate was disturbed, and preferred not to send for the consul. He offered to release Uncle John if he would give the cabman a good lira in exchange for the bad one. The official fee would be five lira--or say three lira--or even two. Uncle John flatly refused to pay anything to anybody. Only war could settle this international complication--bloody and bitter war. The consul must cable at once for war-ships and troops. He would insist upon it. All compromise was now impossible!

The magistrate was frightened. The guard's eyes bulged with horror and he trembled visibly. It was evident they had made a grave mistake in arresting this mad American, who was evidently a personage of great importance and able to declare war at a moment's notice. The cabman, the magistrate, the guard and the interpreter put their heads together and chattered voluble Italian--all speaking at once in excited tones--while Uncle John continued to warn them at the top of his lungs that their country was doomed to sudden annihilation and they were the culprits responsible for the coming calamity.

As a result they bundled the irate American into the carriage again and drove him *poste haste* back to the museum, where they deposited him upon the steps. Then in a flash the guard and the cabman disappeared from sight and were seen no more.

The victor smiled proudly as his nieces rushed toward him.

"Did you have to pay another lira, Uncle?" asked Patsy, anxiously.

"Not on your life, my dear," mopping his brow vigorously. "They're a lot of cutthroats and assassins--policemen, magistrates and all--but when the eagle screams they're wise enough to duck."

The girls laughed.

"And did the eagle scream, then?" Patsy enquired.

"Just a little, my dear; but if it whispered it would sound mighty loud
in this mummified old world. But we've lost enough time for one day.
Come; let's go see 'Narcissus' and the 'Dancing Faun.'"