

## CHAPTER XIV

### UNCLE JOHN DISAPPEARS

Uncle John grew to love Taormina. Its wildness and ruggedness somehow reminded him of the Rockies in the old pioneer days, and he wandered through all the lanes of the quaint old town until he knew every cornice and cobblestone familiarly, and the women who sat weaving or mending before their squalid but picturesque hovels all nodded a greeting to the cheery little American as he passed by.

He climbed Malo, too, a high peak crowned by a ruined castle; and also Mt. Venere, on the plateau of which an ancient city had once stood. His walking tours did him good, and frequently while the girls lay stretched upon the grass that lined the theatre enclosure, to idle the time or read or write enthusiastic letters home, Uncle John, scorning such laziness, would take his stick and climb mountains, or follow the rough paths that diverged from the highway just beyond the Catania Gate.

The tax gatherer whose tiny office was just inside the gate came to know the little gentleman very well, and although he could speak no English he would bob his grizzled head and murmur: "Buon giorno, signore!" as the stranger passed out on his daily stroll.

One afternoon Mr. Merrick went down the hill path leading from the

Castello-a-Mare to Capo di San Andrea, and as he passed around a narrow ledge of rock came full upon two men seated upon a flat stone. One was Valdi and the other Ferralti, and they seemed engaged in earnest conversation when he interrupted them. The Count smiled frankly and doffed his hat; the Duke frowned grimly, but also nodded.

Uncle John passed on. The path was wild and little frequented. He felt in his side pocket and grasped the handle of his revolver; but there was no attempt to follow or molest him. Nevertheless, when he returned from the beach he came up the longer winding roadway and was glad of the company of a ragged goatherd who, having no English, entertained "Il Signore" by singing ditties as he drove his goats before him.

The misgivings Uncle John had originally conceived concerning Count Ferralti returned in full force with this incident; but he resolved to say nothing of it to his nieces. Silas Watson would be with them in a couple of days more and he would consult the shrewd lawyer before he took any decisive action.

Next morning after breakfast he left his nieces in the garden and said he would take a walk through the town and along the highway west, toward Kaggi.

"I'll be back in an hour or so," he remarked, "for I have some letters to write and I want them to catch the noon mail."

So the girls sat on the terrace overlooking the sea and Etna, and breathed the sweet air and enjoyed the caressing sunshine, until they noticed the portiere coming hastily toward them.

"Pardon, signorini," he said, breathlessly, "but it will be to oblige me greatly if you will tell me where Signor Ferralti is."

"He is not of our party," answered Patsy, promptly; but Louise looked up as if startled, and said: "I have been expecting him to join us here."

"Then you do not know?" exclaimed the portiere, in an anxious tone.

"Know what, sir?" asked the girl.

"That Signor Ferralti is gone. He has not been seen by any after last evening. He did not occupy his room. But worse, far worse, will I break you the news gently--his baggage is gone with him!"

"His baggage gone!" echoed Louise, greatly disturbed. "And he did not tell you? You did not see him go?"

"Alas, no, signorina. His bill is still unsettled. He possessed two large travelling cases, which must have been carried out at the side entrance with stealth most deplorable. The padrone is worried. Signor Ferralti is American, and Americans seldom treat us wrongfully."

"Signor Ferralti is Italian," answered Louise, stiffly.

"The name is Italian, perhaps; but he speaks only the English," declared the portiere.

"He is not a rogue, however. Assure your master of that fact. When Mr. Merrick returns he will settle Count Ferralti's bill."

"Oh, Louise!" gasped Patsy.

"I don't understand it in the least," continued Louise, looking at her cousins as if she were really bewildered. "I left him in the courtyard last evening to finish his cigar, and he said he would meet us in the garden after breakfast. I am sure he had no intention of going away. And for the honor of American travellers his account here must be taken care of."

"One thing is singular," observed Beth, calmly. "There has been no train since last you saw him. If Count Ferralti has left the hotel, where could he be?"

The portiere brightened.

"*Gia s'intende!*" he exclaimed, "he must still be in Taormina--doubtless at some other hotel."

"Will you send and find out?" asked Louise.

"I will go myself, and at once," he answered. "And thank you, signorina, for the kind assurance regarding the account. It will relieve the padrone very much."

He hurried away again, and an uneasy silence fell upon the nieces.

"Do you care for this young man, Louise?" asked Beth, pointedly, after the pause had become awkward.

"He is very attentive and gentlemanly, and I feel you have all wronged him by your unjust suspicions," she replied, with spirit.

"That does not answer my question, dear," persisted her cousin. "Are you especially fond of him?"

"What right have you to question me in this way, Beth?"

"No right at all, dear. I am only trying to figure out our doubtful position in regard to this young man--a stranger to all of us but you."

"It is really none of our business," observed Patsy, quickly. "We're just a lot of gossips to be figuring on Count Ferralti at all. And although this sudden disappearance looks queer, on the face of it, the gentleman may simply have changed his boarding place."

"I do not think so," said Louise. "He liked this hotel very much."

"And he may have liked some of its guests," added Patsy, smiling. "Well, Uncle John will soon be back, and then we will talk it over with him."

Uncle John was late. The portiere returned first. He had been to every hotel in the little town, but none of them had received a guest since the afternoon train of yesterday. Count Ferralti had disappeared as if by magic, and no one could account for it.

Noon arrived, but no Uncle John. The girls became dispirited and anxious, for the little man was usually very prompt in keeping his engagements, and always had returned at the set time.

They waited until the last moment and then entered the *salle a manger* and ate their luncheon in gloomy silence, hoping every moment to hear the sound of their uncle's familiar tread.

After luncheon they held a hurried consultation and decided to go into town and search for him. So away they trooped, asking eager questions in their uncertain Italian but receiving no satisfactory reply until they reached the little office of the tax gatherer at the Catania Gate.

"Ah, si, signorini mia," he answered, cheerfully, "il poco signore passato da stamattini."

But he had not returned?

Not yet.

They looked at one another blankly.

"See here," said Patsy; "Uncle John must have lost his way or met with an accident. You go back to the hotel, Louise, and wait there in case he returns home another way. Beth and I will follow some of these paths and see if we can find him."

"He may have sprained an ankle, and be unable to walk," suggested Beth.

"I think Patsy's advice is good."

So Louise returned through the town and the other girls began exploring the paths that led into the mountains from every turn of the highway. But although they searched eagerly and followed each path a mile or more of its length, no sign of life did they encounter--much less a sight of their missing uncle. The paths were wild and unfrequented, only on the Catania road itself a peasant now and then being found patiently trudging along or driving before him a donkey laden with panniers of oranges or lemons for the markets of Taormina.

On some of the solitary rocky paths they called to Uncle John by name, hoping that their voices might reach him; but only the echoes replied.

Finally they grew discouraged.

"It will be sunset before we get back, even if we start this minute," said Beth, finally. "Let us return, and get some one to help us."

Patsy burst into tears.

"Oh, I'm sure he's lost, or murdered, or kidnapped!" she wailed. "Dear, dear Uncle John! Whatever shall we do, Beth?"

"Why, he may be at home, waiting for us to get back. Don't give way, Patsy; it will do no good, you know."

They were thoroughly tired when, just at sunset, they reached the hotel. Louise came to meet them, and by the question in her eyes they knew their uncle had not returned.

"Something must be done, and at once," said Beth, decidedly. She was the younger of the three girls, but in this emergency took the lead because of her calm and unruffled disposition and native good sense. "Is Frascatti in the courtyard?"

Patsy ran to see, and soon brought the vetturino into their sitting room. He could speak English and knew the neighborhood thoroughly. He ought to be able to advise them.



Fascatti listened intently to their story. He was very evidently impressed.

"Tell me, then, signorini," he said, thoughtfully; "is Senor Merreek very rich?"

"Why do you ask?" returned Beth, suspiciously. She remembered the warning conveyed in Mr. Watson's letter.

"Of course, I know that all the Americans who travel are rich," continued Fascatti. "I have myself been in Chicago, which is America. But is Signor Merreek a very rich and well acquainted man in his own country? Believe me, it is well that you answer truly."

"I think he is."

The man looked cautiously around, and then came nearer and dropped his voice to a whisper.

"Are you aware that Il Duca knows this?" he asked.

Beth thought a moment.

"We met the man you call Il Duca, but who told us he was Signor Victor Valdi, on board the ship, where many of the passengers knew my uncle well. If he listened to their conversation he would soon know all about

John Merrick, of course."

Frascatti wagged his head solemnly.

"Then, signorina," he said, still speaking very softly, "I assure you there is no need to worry over your uncle's safety."

"What do you mean?" demanded Beth.

"People do not lose their way in our mountains," he replied. "The paths are straight, and lead all to the highways. And there is little danger of falling or of being injured. But--I regret to say it, signorini--it is a reflection upon our advanced civilization and the good name of our people--but sometimes a man who is rich disappears for a time, and no one knows how it is, or where he may be. He always returns; but then he is not so rich."

"I understand. My uncle is captured by brigands, you think."

"There are no brigands, signorina."

"Or the Mafia, then."

"I do not know the Mafia. All I know is that the very rich should keep their riches secret when they travel. In Chicago, which is America, they will knock you upon the head for a few miserable dollars; here my

countrymen scorn to attack or to rob the common people. But when a man is so very rich that he does not need all of his money, there are, I regret to say, some lawless ones in Sicily who insist that he divide with them. But the prisoner is always well treated, and when he pays he is sent away very happy."

"Suppose he does not pay?"

"Ah, signorina, will not a drowning man clutch the raft that floats by? And the lawless ones do not take his all--merely a part."

The girls looked at one another helplessly.

"What must we do, Frascatti?" asked Patsy.

"Wait. In a day--two days, perhaps--you will hear from your uncle. He will tell you how to send money to the lawless ones. You will follow his instructions, and he will come home with smiles and singing. I know. It is very regrettable, but it is so."

"It will not be so in this case," said Beth, indignantly. "I will see the American consul--"

"I am sorry, but there is none here."

"I will telegraph to Messina for the military. They will search the

mountains, and bring your brigands to justice."

Frascatti smiled sadly.

"Oh, yes; perhaps they will come. But the military is Italian--not Sicilian--and has no experience in these parts. The search will find nothing, except perhaps a dead body thrown upon the rocks to defy justice. It is very regrettable, signorina; but it is so."

Patsy was wringing her hands, frantic with terror. Louise was white and staring. Beth puckered her pretty brow in a frown and tried to think.

"Ferralti is also gone," murmured Louise, in a hoarse voice. "They will rob or murder him with Uncle John!"

"I am quite convinced," said Beth, coldly, "that your false count is a fellow conspirator of the brigand called Il Duca. He has been following us around to get a chance to ensnare Uncle John."

"Oh, no, no, Beth! It is not so! I know better than that."

"He would lie to you, of course," returned the girl bitterly. "As soon as the trap was set he disappeared, bag and baggage, and left the simple girl he had fooled to her own devices."

"You do not know what you are saying," retorted Louise, turning her back

to Beth and walking to a window. From where they stood they could hear her sobbing miserably.

"Whether Frascatti is right or not," said Patsy, drying her eyes and trying to be brave, "we ought to search for Uncle John at once."

"I think so, too," agreed Beth. Then, turning to the Sicilian, she said: "Will you get together as many men as possible and search the hills, with lanterns, for my uncle? You shall be well paid for all you do."

"Most certainly, signorina, if it will please you," he replied. "How long do you wish us to search?"

"Until you find him."

"Then must we grow old in your service. Non fa niente! It is regrettable, but--"

"Will you go at once?" stamping her foot angrily.

"Most certainly, signorina."

"Then lose no time. I will go with you and see you start."

She followed the man out, and kept at his side until he had secured several servants with lanterns for the search. The promise of high

caparra or earnest money made all eager to join the band, but the padrone could only allow a half dozen to leave their stations at the hotel. In the town, however, whither Beth accompanied them, a score of sleepy looking fellows were speedily secured, and under the command of Frascatti, who had resolved to earn his money by energy and good will because there was no chance of success, they marched out of the Catania Gate and scattered along the mountain paths.

"If you find Uncle John before morning I will give you a thousand lira additional," promised Beth.

"We will search faithfully," replied her captain, "but the signorina must not be disappointed if the lawless ones evade us. They have a way of hiding close in the caves, where none may find them. It is regrettable, very; but it is so."

Then he followed his men to the mountains, and as the last glimmer from his lantern died away the girl sighed heavily and returned alone through the deserted streets to the hotel.

Clouds hid the moon and the night was black and forbidding; but it did not occur to her to be afraid.