

## CHAPTER XXII

### NEWS AT LAST

Kenneth Forbes had always been an unusual boy. He had grown up in an unfriendly atmosphere, unloved and uncared for, and resented this neglect with all the force of his impetuous nature. He had hated Aunt Jane, and regarded her as cruel and selfish--a fair estimate of her character--until Aunt Jane's nieces taught him to be more considerate and forgiving. Patricia, especially, had exercised a gentler influence upon the arbitrary youth, and as a consequence they had become staunch friends.

When the unexpected inheritance of a fortune changed the boy's condition from one of dependence to one of importance he found he had no longer any wrongs to resent; therefore his surly and brusque moods gradually disappeared, and he became a pleasant companion to those he cared for. With strangers he still remained reserved and suspicious, and occasionally the old sullen fits would seize him and it was well to avoid his society while they lasted.

On his arrival at Taormina, Kenneth had entered earnestly into the search for Uncle John, whom he regarded most affectionately; and, having passed the day tramping over the mountains, he would fill the evening with discussions and arguments with the nieces concerning the fate of

their missing uncle.

But as the days dragged wearily away the search slackened and was finally abandoned. Kenneth set up his easel in the garden and began to paint old Etna, with its wreath of snow and the soft gray cloud of vapor that perpetually hovered over it.

"Anyone with half a soul could paint that!" said Patsy; and as a proof of her assertion the boy did very well indeed, except that his uneasiness on Mr. Merrick's account served to distract him more or less.

Nor was Kenneth the only uneasy one. Mr. Watson, hard-headed man of resource as he was, grew more and more dejected as he realized the impossibility of interesting the authorities in the case. The Sicilian officials were silent and uncommunicative; the Italians wholly indifferent. If strangers came to Taormina and got into difficulties, the government was in no way to blame. It was their duty to tolerate tourists, but those all too energetic foreigners must take care of themselves.

Probably Mr. Watson would have cabled the State Department at Washington for assistance had he not expected each day to put him in communication with his friend, and in the end he congratulated himself upon his patience. The close of the week brought a sudden and startling change in the situation.

The girls sat on the shaded terrace one afternoon, watching the picture of Etna grow under Kenneth's deft touches, when they observed a child approaching them with shy diffidence. It was a beautiful Sicilian boy, with wonderful brown eyes and a delicate profile. After assuring himself that the party of young Americans was quite separate from any straggling guest of the hotel, the child came near enough to say, in a low tone:

"I have a message from Signor Merrick."

They crowded around him eagerly then, raining questions from every side; but the boy shrank away and said, warningly:

"If we are overheard, signorini mia, it will be very bad. No one must suspect that I am here."

"Is my uncle well?" asked Patsy, imploringly.

"Quite well, mees."

"And have you also news of Count Ferralti?" anxiously enquired Louise.

"Oh, Ferralti? He is better. Some teeth are knocked out, but he eats very well without them," replied the child, with an amused laugh.

"Where are our friends, my lad?" Kenneth asked.

"I cannot describe the place, signore; but here are letters to explain all." The child produced a bulky package, and after a glance at each, in turn, placed it in Patsy's hands. "Read very secretly, signorini, and decide your course of action. To-morrow I will come for your answer. In the meantime, confide in no one but yourselves. If you are indiscreet, you alone will become the murderers of Signor Merrick and the sad young Ferralti."

"Who are you?" asked Beth, examining the child closely.

"I am called Tato, signorina mia."

"Where do you live?"

"It is all explained in the letters, believe me."

Beth glanced at Patricia, who was examining the package, and now all crowded around for a glimpse of Uncle John's well-known handwriting. The wrapper was inscribed:

"To Miss Doyle, Miss De Graf and Miss Merrick,  
Hotel Castello-a-Mare, Taormina.  
By the safe hands of Tato."

Inside were two letters, one addressed to Louise personally. She seized this and ran a little distance away, while Beth took Uncle John's letter

from Patsy's trembling hands, and having opened it read aloud in a clear and composed voice the following:

"My dear Nieces: (and also my dear friends, Silas Watson and Kenneth Forbes, if they are with you) Greeting! You have perhaps been wondering at my absence, which I will explain by saying that I am visiting a noble acquaintance in a very cozy and comfortable retreat which I am sure would look better from a distance. My spirits and health are A No. 1 and it is my intention to return to you as soon as you have executed a little commission for me, which I want you to do exactly as I hereby instruct you. In other words, if you don't execute the commission you will probably execute me.

"I have decided to purchase a valuable antique ring from my host, at a price of fifty thousand dollars, which trifling sum I must have at once to complete the transaction, for until full payment is made I cannot rejoin you. Therefore you must hasten to raise the dough. Here's the programme, my dear girls: One of you must go by first train to Messina and cable Isham, Marvin & Co. to deposit with the New York correspondents of the Banca Commerciale Italiana fifty thousand dollars, and have instructions cabled to the Messina branch of that bank to pay the sum to the written order of John Merrick. This should all be accomplished within twenty-four hours. Present the enclosed order,

together with my letter of credit and passport, which will identify my signature, and draw the money in cash. Return with it to Taormina and give it secretly to the boy Tato, who will bring it to me. I will rejoin you within three hours after I have paid for the ring.

"This may seem a strange proceeding to you, my dears, but you must not hesitate to accomplish it--if you love me. Should my old friend Silas Watson be now with you, as I expect him to be, he will assist you to do my bidding, for he will be able to realize, better than I can now explain, how important it is to me.

"Also I beg you to do a like service for Count Ferralti, who is entrusting his personal commission, to Louise. He also must conclude an important purchase before he can return to Taormina.

"More than this I am not permitted to say in this letter. Confide in no stranger, or official of any sort, and act as secretly and quietly as possible. I hope soon to be with you.

"Very affectionately,           UNCLE JOHN."

"What does it all mean?" asked Patsy, bewildered, when Beth had finished

reading.

"Why, it is clear enough, I'm sure," said Kenneth. "Uncle John is imprisoned by brigands, and the money he requires is his ransom. We must get it as soon as possible, you know, and luckily he is so rich that he won't miss this little draft at all."

Beth sat silent, angrily staring at the letter.

"I suppose," said Patsy, hesitating, "the robbers will do the dear uncle some mischief, if he doesn't pay."

"Just knock him on the head, that's all," said the boy. "But there's no need to worry. We can get the money easily."

Suddenly Beth jumped up.

"Where's that girl?" she demanded, sharply.

"What girl?"

"Tato."

"Tato, my dear coz, is a boy," answered Kenneth; "and he disappeared ages ago."

"You must be blind," said Beth, scornfully, "not to recognize a girl when you see one. A boy, indeed!"

"Why, he dressed like a boy," replied Kenneth, hesitatingly.

"So much the more disgraceful," sniffed Beth. "She belongs to those brigands, I suppose."

"Looks something like Victor Valdi," said Patsy, thoughtfully.

"Il Duca? Of course! I see it myself, now. Patricia, it is that wicked duke who has captured Uncle John."

"I had guessed that," declared Patsy, smiling.

"He must be a handsome rascal," observed Kenneth, "for the child is pretty as a picture."

"He isn't handsome at all," replied Beth; "but there is a look about the child's eyes that reminds me of him."

"That's it, exactly," agreed Patsy.

Louise now approached them with a white, frightened face.

"Isn't it dreadful!" she moaned. "They are going to kill Ferralti unless



he gives them thirty thousand dollars."

"And I don't believe he can raise thirty cents," said Patsy, calmly.

"Oh, yes, he can," answered Louise, beginning to cry. "Hi--his--father is d--dead, and has left him--a--fortune."

"Don't blubber, Lou," said the boy, chidingly; "in that case your dago friend is as well off as need be. But I suppose you're afraid the no-account Count won't figure his life is worth thirty thousand dollars. It does seem like an awful price to pay for a foreigner."

"It isn't that," said Louise, striving to control her emotion. "He says he hates to be robbed. He wouldn't pay a penny if he could help it."

"Good for the Count! I don't blame him a bit," exclaimed Beth. "It is a beastly shame that free born Americans should be enslaved by a crew of thieving Sicilians, and obliged to purchase their freedom!"

"True for you," said Kenneth, nodding. "But what are we going to do about it?"

"Pay, of course," decided Patsy, promptly. "Our Uncle John is too precious to be sacrificed for all the money in the world. Come; let's go and find Mr. Watson. We ought not to lose a moment's time."

The lawyer read Uncle John's letter carefully, as well as the one from Count Ferralti, which Louise confided to him with the request that he keep the young man's identity a secret for a time, until he could reveal it to her cousins in person.

"The only thing to be done," announced Mr. Watson, "is to carry out these instructions faithfully. We can send the cable messages from here, and in the morning Louise and I will take the train for Messina and remain there until we get the money."

"It's an outrage!" cried Beth.

"Of course, my dear. But it can't be helped. And your uncle is wise to take the matter so cheerfully. After all, it is little enough to pay for one's life and liberty, and our friend is so wealthy that he will never feel the loss at all."

"It isn't that; it's the principle of the thing that I object to," said the girl. "It's downright disgraceful to be robbed so easily."

"To be sure; but the disgrace is Italy's, not ours. Object all you want to, Beth, dear," continued the old lawyer, smiling at her; "but nevertheless we'll pay as soon as possible, and have done with it. What we want now is your Uncle John, and we want him mighty badly."

"Really, the pirates didn't charge enough for him," added Patsy.

So Mr. Watson sent the cables to John Merrick's bankers and Count Ferralti's attorney, and the next morning went with Louise to Messina.

Frascatti drove all the party down the road to the station at Giardini, and as the train pulled out, Beth, who had remained seated in the victoria with Patricia and Kenneth, suddenly stood up to pull the vetturino's sleeve.

"Tell me, Frascatti," she whispered, "isn't that Il Duca's child? Look--that little one standing in the corner?"

"Why, yes; it is really Tato," answered the man, before he thought to deny it.

"Very well; you may now drive us home," returned Beth, a shade of triumph in her voice.