

CHAPTER XXX

A WAY TO FORGET

The faces of the group, as Uncle John finished reading, were worth studying. Arthur Weldon was white with anger, and his eyes blazed. Silas Watson stared blankly at his old friend, wondering if it was because he was growing old that he had been so easily hoodwinked by this saucy child. Beth was biting her lip to keep back the tears of humiliation that longed to trickle down her cheeks. Louise frowned because she remembered the hard things Tato had said of her. Patsy was softly crying at the loss of her friend.

Then Kenneth laughed, and the sound sent a nervous shiver through the group.

"Tato's a brick!" announced the boy, audaciously. "Can't you see, you stupid, that the thing is a good joke on us all? Or are you too thin skinned to laugh at your own expense?"

"Oh, we can laugh," responded Uncle John, gravely. "But if Tato's a brick it's because she is hard and insensible. The loss of the money doesn't hurt me, but to think the wicked little lass made me love her when she didn't deserve it is the hardest blow I have ever received."

That made Patsy sob outright, while Louise ejaculated, with scorn: "The little wretch!"

"It serves us right for having confidence in a child reared to crime and murder from the cradle," said Arthur, rather savagely. "I don't know how much money I am worth, but I'd gladly spend another thirty thousand to bring this wretched creature to justice."

"Money won't do it," declared the lawyer, shaking his head regretfully.

"The rascals are too clever to be caught in Europe. It would be different at home."

"Well, the best thing to do is to grin and bear it, and forget the unpleasant incident as soon as possible," said Uncle John. "I feel as if I'd had my pocket picked by my best friend, but it isn't nearly as disgraceful as being obliged to assist the thief by paying ransom money. The loss amounts to nothing to either of us, and such treachery, thank goodness, is rare in the world. We can't afford to let the thing make us unhappy, my friends; so cheer up, all of you, and don't dwell upon it any more than you can help."

They left Syracuse a rather solemn group, in spite of this wise advice, and journeyed back to Naples and thence to Rome. There was much to see here, and they saw it so energetically that when they boarded the train for Florence they were all fagged out and could remember nothing clearly except the Coliseum and the Baths of Carracalla.

Florence was just now a bower of roses and very beautiful. But Kenneth lugged them to the galleries day after day until Uncle John declared he hated to look an "old master" in the face.

"After all, they're only daubs," he declared. "Any ten-year-old boy in America can paint better pictures."

"Don't let anyone hear you say that, dear," cautioned Patsy. "They'd think you don't know good art."

"But I do," he protested. "If any of those pictures by old masters was used in a street-car 'ad' at home it would be money wasted, for no one would look at them. The people wouldn't stand for it a minute."

"They are wonderful for the age in which they were painted," said Kenneth, soberly. "You must remember that we have had centuries in which to improve our art, since then."

"Oh, I've a proper respect for old age, I hope," replied Uncle John; "but to fall down and worship a thing because it's gray-haired and out-of-date isn't just my style. All of these 'Oh!'s' and 'Ahs!' over the old masters are rank humbug, and I'm ashamed of the people that don't know better."

And now Arthur Weldon was obliged to bid good-bye to Louise and her

friends and take a train directly to Paris to catch the steamer for home. His attorney advised him that business demanded his immediate presence, and he was obliged to return, however reluctantly.

Kenneth and Mr. Watson also left the party at Florence, as the boy artist wished to remain there for a time to study the pictures that Uncle John so bitterly denounced. The others went on to Venice, which naturally proved to the nieces one of the most delightful places they had yet seen. Mr. Merrick loved it because he could ride in a gondola and rest his stubby legs, which had become weary with tramping through galleries and cathedrals. These last monuments, by the way, had grown to become a sort of nightmare to the little gentleman. The girls were enthusiastic over cathedrals, and allowed none to escape a visit. For a time Uncle John had borne up bravely, but the day of rebellion was soon coming.

"No cathedrals in Venice, I hope?" he had said on their arrival.

"Oh, yes, dear; the loveliest one in the world! St. Mark's is here, you know."

"But no St. Paul's or St. Peter's?"

"No, Uncle. There's the Saluta, and the--"

"Never mind. We'll do that first one, and then quit. What they build so

many churches for I can't imagine. Nobody goes to 'em but tourists, that I can see."

He developed a streak of extravagance in Venice, and purchased Venetian lace and Venetian glassware to such an extent that the nieces had to assure him they were all supplied with enough to last them and their friends for all time to come. Major Doyle had asked for a meerschaum pipe and a Florentine leather pocket book; so Uncle John made a collection of thirty-seven pipes of all shapes and sizes, and bought so many pocketbooks that Patsy declared her father could use a different one every day in the month.

"But they're handy things to have," said her uncle, "and we may not get to Europe again in a hurry."

This was his excuse for purchasing many things, and it was only by reminding him of the duty he would have to pay in New York that the girls could induce him to desist.

This customs tax worried the old gentleman at times. Before this trip he had always believed in a protective tariff, but now he referred to the United States customs as a species of brigandage worse than that of Il Duca himself.

They stopped at Milan to visit the great cathedral, and then raced through Switzerland and made a dash from Luzerne to Paris.

"Thank heaven," said Uncle John, "there are no cathedrals in gay Paree, at any rate."

"Oh, yes there are," they assured him. "We must see Notre Dame, anyway; and there are a dozen other famous cathedrals."

Here is where Uncle John balked.

"See here, my dears," he announced, "Not a cathedral will I visit from this time on! You can take a guide and go by yourselves if you feel you can't let any get away from you. Go and find another of Mike Angelo's last work; every church has got one. For my part, I've always been religiously inclined, but I've been to church enough lately to last me the rest of my natural life, and I've fully determined not to darken the doors of another cathedral again. They're like circuses, anyhow; when you've seen one, you've seen 'em all."

No argument would induce him to abandon this position; so the girls accepted his proposal and visited their beloved cathedrals in charge of a guide, whose well of information was practically inexhaustible if not remarkable for its clarity.

The opera suited Uncle John better, and he freely revelled in the shops, purchasing the most useless and preposterous things in spite of that growing bugbear of the customs duties.

But finally this joyous holiday came to an end, as all good things will, and they sailed from Cherbourg for New York.

Uncle John had six extra trunks, Patsy carried a French poodle that was as much trouble as an infant in arms, and Louise engineered several hat-boxes that could not be packed at the last minute. But the girls embarked gay and rosy-cheeked and animated, and in spite of all the excitement and pleasure that had attended their trip, not one of the party was really sorry when the return voyage began.