

BAUM LYMAN FRANK

AUNT JANE'S NIECES
ABROAD

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Aunt Jane's Nieces Abroad

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L. Frank Baum

Aunt Jane's Nieces Abroad

PREFATORY:

The author is pleased to be able to present a sequel to "Aunt Jane's Nieces," the book which was received with so much favor last year. Yet it is not necessary one should have read the first book to fully understand the present volume, the characters being taken to entirely new scenes.

The various foreign localities are accurately described, so that those who have visited them will recognize them at once, while those who have not been so fortunate may acquire a clear conception of them. It was my good fortune to be an eye witness of the recent great eruption of Vesuvius.

Lest I be accused of undue sensationalism in relating the somewhat dramatic Sicilian incident, I will assure my reader that the story does not exaggerate present conditions in various parts of the island. In fact, Il Duca and Tato are drawn from life, although they did not have their mountain lair so near to Taormina as I have ventured to locate it. Except that I have adapted their clever system of brigandage to the exigencies of this story, their history is truly related. Many who have travelled somewhat outside the beaten tracks in Sicily will frankly vouch for this statement.

Italy is doing its best to suppress the Mafia and to eliminate brigandage from the beautiful islands it controls, but so few of the inhabitants are Italians or in sympathy with the government that the work of reformation is necessarily slow. Americans, especially, must exercise caution in travelling in any part of Sicily; yet with proper care not to tempt the irresponsible natives, they are as safe in Sicily as they are at home.

Aunt Jane's nieces are shown to be as frankly adventurous as the average clear headed American girl, but their experiences amid the environments of an ancient and still primitive civilization are in no wise extraordinary.

Edith Van Dyne.

CHAPTER I

THE DOYLES ARE ASTONISHED

It was Sunday afternoon in Miss Patricia Doyle's pretty flat at 3708 Willing Square. In the small drawing room Patricia – or Patsy, as she preferred to be called – was seated at the piano softly playing the one "piece" the music teacher had succeeded in drilling into her flighty head by virtue of much patience and perseverance. In a thick cushioned morris-chair reclined the motionless form of Uncle John, a chubby little man in a gray suit, whose features were temporarily eclipsed by the newspaper that was spread carefully over them. Occasionally a gasp or a snore from beneath the paper suggested that the little man was "snoozing" as he sometimes gravely called it, instead of listening to the music.

Major Doyle sat opposite, stiffly erect, with his admiring eyes full upon Patsy. At times he drummed upon the arms of his chair in unison with the music, nodding his grizzled head to mark the time as well as to emphasize his evident approbation. Patsy had played this same piece from start to finish seven times since dinner, because it was the only one she knew; but the Major could have listened to it seven hundred times without the flicker of an eyelash. It was not that he admired so much the "piece" the girl was playing as the girl who was playing the "piece." His pride in Patsy was unbounded. That she should have succeeded at all in mastering that imposing looking instrument – making it actually "play chunes" – was surely a thing to wonder at. But then, Patsy could do anything, if she but tried.

Suddenly Uncle John gave a dreadful snort and sat bolt upright, gazing at his companions with a startled look that melted into one of benign complacency as he observed his surroundings and realized where he was. The interruption gave Patsy an opportunity to stop playing the tune. She swung around on the stool and looked with amusement at her newly awakened uncle.

"You've been asleep," she said.

"No, indeed; quite a mistake," replied the little man, seriously. "I've only been thinking."

"An' such *beautchiful* thoughts," observed the Major, testily, for he resented the interruption of his Sunday afternoon treat. "You thought 'em aloud, sir, and the sound of it was a bad imithation of a bullfrog in a marsh. You'll have to give up eating the salad, sir."

"Bah! don't I know?" asked Uncle John, indignantly.

"Well, if your knowledge is better than our hearing, I suppose you do," retorted the Major. "But to an ignorant individual like meself the impression conveyed was that you snored like a man that has forgotten his manners an' gone to sleep in the prisence of a lady."

"Then no one has a better right to do that," declared Patsy, soothingly; "and I'm sure our dear Uncle John's thoughts were just the most beautiful dreams in the world. Tell us of them, sir, and we'll prove the Major utterly wrong."

Even her father smiled at the girl's diplomacy, and Uncle John, who was on the verge of unreasonable anger, beamed upon her gratefully.

"I'm going to Europe," he said.

The Major gave an involuntary start, and then turned to look at him curiously.

"And I'm going to take Patsy along," he continued, with a mischievous grin.

The Major frowned.

"Conthrol yourself, sir, until you are fully awake," said he. "You're dreaming again."

Patsy swung her feet from side to side, for she was such a little thing that the stool raised her entirely off the floor. There was a thoughtful look on her round, freckled face, and a wistful one in her great blue eyes as the full meaning of Uncle John's abrupt avowal became apparent.

The Major was still frowning, but a half frightened expression had replaced the one of scornful raillery. For he, too, knew that his eccentric brother-in-law was likely to propose any preposterous

thing, and then carry it out in spite of all opposition. But to take Patsy to Europe would be like pulling the Major's eye teeth or amputating his good right arm. Worse; far worse! It would mean taking the sunshine out of her old father's sky altogether, and painting it a grim, despairing gray.

But he resolved not to submit without a struggle.

"Sir," said he, sternly – he always called his brother-in-law "sir" when he was in a sarcastic or reproachful mood – "I've had an idea for some time that you were plotting mischief. You haven't looked me straight in the eye for a week, and you've twice been late to dinner. I will ask you to explain to us, sir, the brutal suggestion you have just advanced."

Uncle John laughed. In the days when Major Doyle had thought him a poor man and in need of a helping hand, the grizzled old Irishman had been as tender toward him as a woman and studiously avoided any speech or epithet that by chance might injure the feelings of his dead wife's only brother. But the Major's invariable courtesy to the poor or unfortunate was no longer in evidence when he found that John Merrick was a multi-millionaire with a strongly defined habit of doing good to others and striving in obscure and unconventional ways to make everybody around him happy. His affection for the little man increased mightily, but his respectful attitude promptly changed, and a chance to reprove or discomfit his absurdly rich brother-in-law was one of his most satisfactory diversions. Uncle John appreciated this, and holding the dignified Major in loving regard was glad to cross swords with him now and then to add variety to their pleasant relations.

"It's this way, Major Doyle," he now remarked, coolly. "I've been worried to death, lately, over business matters; and I need a change."

"Phoo! All your business is attended to by Isham, Marvin & Co. You've no worry at all. Why, we've just made you a quarter of a million in C.H. & D's."

The "we" is explained by stating that the Major held an important position in the great banking house – a position Mr. Merrick had secured for him some months previously.

"That's it!" said Uncle John. "You've made me a quarter of a million that I don't want. The C.H. & D. stocks were going to pieces when I bought them, and I had reason to hope I'd lose a good round sum on them. But the confounded luck turned, and the result is an accumulation of all this dreadful money. So, my dear Major, before I'm tempted to do some-other foolish thing I've determined to run away, where business can't follow me, and where by industry and perseverance I can scatter some of my ill-gotten gains."

The Major smiled grimly.

"That's Europe, right enough," he said. "And I don't object, John, to your going there whenever you please. You're disgracefully countryfied and uninformed for a man of means, and Europe'll open your eyes and prove to you how insignificant you really are. I advise you to visit Ireland, sor, which I'm reliably informed is the centhral jewel in Europe's crown of beauty. Go; and go whinever you please, sor; but forbear the wickedness of putting foolish thoughts into our Patsy's sweet head. She can't go a step, and you know it. It's positive cruelty to her, sir, to suggest such a thing!"

The Major's speech had a touch of the brogue when he became excited, but recovered when he calmed down.

"Why, you selfish old humbug!" cried Uncle John, indignantly. "Why can't she go, when there's money and time to spare? Would you keep her here to cuddle and spoil a vigorous man like yourself, when she can run away and see the world and be happy?"

"It's a great happiness to cuddle the Major," said Patsy, softly; "and the poor man needs it as much as he does his slippers or his oatmeal for breakfast."

"And Patsy has the house to look after," added the Major, complacently.

Uncle John gave a snort of contempt.

"For an unreasonable man, show me an Irishman," he remarked. "Here you've been telling me how Europe is an education and a delight, and in the next breath you deliberately deprive your little daughter, whom you pretend to love, of the advantages she might gain by a trip abroad! And

why? Just because you want her yourself, and might be a bit lonesome without her. But I'll settle that foolishness, sir, in short order. You shall go with us."

"Impossible!" ejaculated the Major. "It's the time of year I'm most needed in the office, and Mr. Marvin has been so kind and considerate that I won't play him a dirty trick by leaving him in the lurch."

Patsy nodded approval.

"That's right, daddy," she said.

Uncle John lay back in the chair and put the newspaper over his face again. Patsy and her father stared at one another with grave intentness. Then the Major drew out his handkerchief and mopped his brow.

"You'd like to go, mavourneen?" he asked, softly.

"Yes, daddy; but I won't, of course."

"Tut-tut! don't you go putting yourself against your old father's will, Patsy. It's not so far to Europe," he continued, thoughtfully, "and you won't be away much longer than you were when you went to Elmhurst after Aunt Jane's money – which you didn't get. Mary takes fine care of our little rooms, and doubtless I shall be so busy that I won't miss you at all, at all."

"Daddy!"

She was in his lap, now, her chubby arms clasped around his neck and her soft cheek laid close beside his rough and ruddy one.

"And when ye get back, Patsy darlin'," he whispered, tenderly stroking her hair, "the joy of the meeting will make up for all that we've suffered. It's the way of life, mavourneen. Unless a couple happens to be Siamese twins, they're bound to get separated in the course of events, more or less, if not frequently."

"I won't go, daddy."

"Oh, yes you will. It's not like you to be breakin' my heart by stayin' home. Next week, said that wicked old uncle – he reminds me of the one that tried to destroy the Babes in the Woods, Patsy dear. You must try to reclaim him to humanity, for I'm hopin' there's a bit of good in the old rascal yet." And he looked affectionately at the round little man under the newspaper.

Uncle John emerged again. It was wonderful how well he understood the Doyle family. His face was now smiling and wore a look of supreme satisfaction.

"Your selfishness, my dear Major," said he, "is like the husk on a cocoanut. When you crack it there's plenty of milk within – and in your case it's the milk of human kindness. Come! let's talk over the trip."

CHAPTER II

UNCLE JOHN MAKES PLANS

"The thought came to me a long time ago," Uncle John resumed; "but it was only yesterday that I got all the details fixed and settled in my mind. I've been a rough old duffer, Patsy, and in all my hard working life never thought of such a thing as travelling or enjoying myself until I fell in with you, and you taught me how pleasant it is to scatter sunshine in the hearts of others. For to make others happy means a lot of joy for yourself – a secret you were trying to keep from me, you crafty young woman, until I discovered it by accident. Now, here I am with three nieces on my hands – "

"You may say two, sir," interrupted the Major. "Patsy can take care of herself."

"Hold your tongue," said Uncle John. "I say I've got three nieces – as fine a trio of intelligent, sweet and attractive young women as you'll run across in a month of Sundays. I dare you to deny it, sir. And they are all at an age when an European trip will do them a world of good. So off we go, a week from Tuesday, in the first-class steamer 'Princess Irene,' bound from New York for the Bay of Naples!"

Patsy's eyes showed her delight. They fairly danced.

"Have you told Beth and Louise?" she asked.

His face fell.

"Not yet," he said. "I'd forgotten to mention it to them."

"For my part," continued the girl, "I can get ready in a week, easily. But Beth is way out in Ohio, and we don't know whether she can go or not."

"I'll telegraph her, and find out," said Uncle John.

"Do it to-day," suggested the Major.

"I will."

"And to-morrow you must see Louise," added Patsy. "I'm not sure she'll want to go, dear. She's such a social butterfly, you know, that her engagements may keep her at home."

"Do you mean to say she's engaged?" asked Mr. Merrick, aghast.

"Only for the parties and receptions, Uncle. But it wouldn't surprise me if she was married soon. She's older than Beth or me, and has a host of admirers."

"Perhaps she's old enough to be sensible," suggested the Major.

"Well, I'll see her and her mother to-morrow morning," decided Uncle John, "and if she can't find time for a trip to Europe at my expense, you and Beth shall go anyhow – and we'll bring Louise a wedding present."

With this declaration he took his hat and walking stick and started for the telegraph station, leaving Patsy and her father to canvass the unexpected situation.

John Merrick was sixty years old, but as hale and rugged as a boy of twenty. He had made his vast fortune on the Pacific Coast and during his years of busy activity had been practically forgotten by the Eastern members of his family, who never had credited him with sufficient ability to earn more than a precarious livelihood. But the man was shrewd enough in a business way, although simple almost to childishness in many other matters. When he returned, quite unheralded, to end his days "at home" and employ his ample wealth to the best advantage, he for a time kept his success a secret, and so learned much of the dispositions and personal characteristics of his three nieces.

They were at that time visiting his unmarried sister, Jane, at her estate at Elmhurst, whither they had been invited for the first time; and in the race for Aunt Jane's fortune he watched the three girls carefully and found much to admire in each one of them. Patsy Doyle, however, proved exceptionally frank and genuine, and when Aunt Jane at last died and it was found she had no estate to bequeath, Patsy proved the one bright star in the firmament of disappointment. Supposing Uncle John to be

poor, she insisted upon carrying him to New York with her and sharing with him the humble tenement room in which she lived with her father – a retired veteran who helped pay the family expenses by keeping books for a mercantile firm, while Patsy worked in a hair-dresser's shop.

It was now that Uncle John proved a modern fairy godfather to Aunt Jane's nieces – who were likewise his own nieces. The three girls had little in common except their poverty, Elizabeth De Graf being the daughter of a music teacher, in Cloverton, Ohio, while Louise Merrick lived with her widowed mother in a social atmosphere of the second class in New York, where the two women frankly intrigued to ensnare for Louise a husband who had sufficient means to ensure both mother and daughter a comfortable home. In spite of this worldly and unlovely ambition, which their circumstances might partially excuse, Louise, who was but seventeen, had many good and womanly qualities, could they have been developed in an atmosphere uninfluenced by the schemes of her vain and selfish mother.

Uncle John, casting aside the mask of poverty, came to the relief of all three girls. He settled the incomes of substantial sums of money upon both Beth and Louise, making them practically independent. For Patsy he bought a handsome modern flat building located at 3708 Willing Square, and installed her and the Major in its cosiest apartment, the rents of the remaining flats giving the Doyles an adequate income for all time to come. Here Uncle John, believing himself cordially welcome, as indeed he was, made his own home, and it required no shrewd guessing to arrive at the conclusion that little Patsy was destined to inherit some day all his millions.

The great banking and brokerage firm of Isham, Marvin & Co. had long managed successfully John Merrick's vast fortune, and at his solicitation it gave Major Doyle a responsible position in its main office, with a salary that rendered him independent of his daughter's suddenly acquired wealth and made him proud and self-respecting.

Money had no power to change the nature of the Doyles. The Major remained the same simple, honest, courteous yet brusque old warrior who had won Uncle John's love as a hard working book-keeper; and Patsy's bright and sunny disposition had certain power to cheer any home, whether located in a palace or a hovel.

Never before in his life had Uncle John been so supremely happy, and never before had Aunt Jane's three nieces had so many advantages and pleasures. It was to confer still further benefits upon these girls that their eccentric uncle had planned this unexpected European trip.

His telegram to Elizabeth was characteristic:

"Patsy, Louise and I sail for Europe next Tuesday. Will you join us as my guest? If so, take first train to New York, where I will look after your outfit. Answer immediately."

That was a message likely to surprise a country girl, but it did not strike John Merrick as in any way extraordinary. He thought he could depend upon Beth. She would be as eager to go as he was to have her, and when he had paid for the telegram he dismissed the matter from further thought.

Next morning Patsy reminded him that instead of going down town he must personally notify Louise Merrick of the proposed trip; so he took a cross-town line and arrived at the Merrick's home at nine o'clock.

Mrs. Merrick was in a morning wrapper, sipping her coffee in an upper room. But she could not deny herself to Uncle John, her dead husband's brother and her only daughter's benefactor (which meant indirectly her own benefactor), so she ordered the maid to show him up at once.

"Louise is still sweetly sleeping," she said, "and won't waken for hours yet."

"Is anything wrong with her?" he asked, anxiously.

"Oh, dear, no! but everyone does not get up with the milkman, as you do, John; and the dear child was at the opera last night, which made her late in getting home."

"Doesn't the opera let out before midnight, the same as the theatres?" he asked.

"I believe so; but there is the supper, afterward, you know."

"Ah, yes," he returned, thoughtfully. "I've always noticed that the opera makes folks desperately hungry, for they flock to the restaurants as soon as they can get away. Singular, isn't it?"

"Why, I never thought of it in that light."

"But Louise is well?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"That's a great relief, for I'm going to take her to Europe with me next week," he said.

Mrs. Merrick was so astonished that she nearly dropped her coffee-cup and could make no better reply than to stare blankly at her brother-in-law.

"We sail Tuesday," continued Uncle John, "and you must have my niece ready in time and deliver her on board the 'Princess Irene' at Hoboken at nine o'clock, sharp."

"But John – John!" gasped Mrs. Merrick, feebly, "it will take a month, at least, to make her gowns, and –"

"Stuff and rubbish!" he growled. "That shows, Martha, how little you know about European trips. No one makes gowns to go abroad with; you buy 'em in Paris to bring home."

"Ah, yes; to be sure," she muttered. "Perhaps, then, it can be done, if Louise, has no other engagements."

"Just what Patsy said. See here, Martha, do you imagine that any girl who is half human could have engagements that would keep her from Europe?"

"But the requirements of society –"

"You'll get me riled, pretty soon, Martha; and if you do you'll wish you hadn't."

This speech frightened the woman. It wouldn't do to provoke Uncle John, however unreasonable he happened to be. So she said, meekly:

"I've no doubt Louise will be delighted to go, and so will I."

"You!"

"Why – why – whom do you intend taking?"

"Just the three girls – Aunt Jane's three nieces. Also mine."

"But you'll want a chaperone for them."

"Why so?"

"Propriety requires it; and so does ordinary prudence. Louise, I know, will be discreet, for it is her nature; but Patsy is such a little flyaway and Beth so deep and demure, that without a chaperone they might cause you a lot of trouble."

Uncle John grew red and his eyes flashed.

"A chaperone!" he cried, contemptuously; "not any in mine, Martha Merrick. Either we young folks go alone, without any death's head to perpetually glower at us, or we don't go at all! Three better girls never lived, and I'll trust 'em anywhere. Besides that, we aren't going to any of your confounded social functions; we're going on a reg'lar picnic, and if I don't give those girls the time of their lives my name ain't John Merrick. A chaperone, indeed!"

Mrs. Merrick held up her hands in horror.

"I'm not sure, John," she gasped, "that I ought to trust my dear child with an uncle who disregards so openly the proprieties."

"Well, I'm sure; and the thing's settled," he said, more calmly. "Don't worry, ma'am. I'll look after Patsy and Beth, and Louise will look after all of us – just as she does after you – because she's so discreet. Talk about your being a chaperone! Why, you don't dare say your soul's your own when Louise is awake. That chaperone business is all humbuggery – unless an old uncle like me can be a chaperone. Anyhow, I'm the only one that's going to be appointed. I won't wait for Louise to wake up. Just tell her the news and help her to get ready on time. And now, I'm off. Good morning, Martha."

She really had no words of protest ready at hand, and it was long after queer old John Merrick had gone away that she remembered a dozen effective speeches that she might have delivered.

"After all," she sighed, taking up her cup again, "it may be the best thing in the world for Louise. We don't know whether that young Weldon, who is paying her attentions just now, is going to inherit his father's money or not. He's been a bit wild, I've heard, and it is just as well to postpone any engagement until we find out the facts. I can do that nicely while my sweet child is in Europe with Uncle John, and away from all danger of entanglements. Really, it's an ill wind that blows no good! I'll go talk with Louise."

CHAPTER III

"ALL ASHORE"

Beth De Graf was a puzzle to all who knew her. She was a puzzle even to herself, and was wont to say, indifferently, that the problem was not worth a solution. For this beautiful girl of fifteen was somewhat bitter and misanthropic, a condition perhaps due to the uncongenial atmosphere in which she had been reared. She was of dark complexion and her big brown eyes held a sombre and unfathomable expression. Once she had secretly studied their reflection in a mirror, and the eyes awed and frightened her, and made her uneasy. She had analyzed them much as if they belonged to someone else, and wondered what lay behind their mask, and what their capabilities might be.

But this morbid condition mostly affected her when she was at home, listening to the unpleasant bickerings of her father and mother, who quarrelled constantly over trifles that Beth completely ignored. Her parents seemed like two ill tempered animals confined in the same cage, she thought, and their snarls had long since ceased to interest her.

This condition had, of course, been infinitely worse in all those dreadful years when they were poverty stricken. Since Uncle John had settled a comfortable income on his niece the grocer was paid promptly and Mrs. De Graf wore a silk dress on Sundays and held her chin a little higher than any other of the Cloverton ladies dared do. The Professor, no longer harrassed by debts, devoted less time to the drudgery of teaching and began the composition of an oratorio that he firmly believed would render his name famous. So, there being less to quarrel about, Beth's parents indulged more moderately in that pastime; but their natures were discordant, and harmony in the De Graf household was impossible.

When away from home Beth's disposition softened. Some of her school-friends had seen her smile – a wonderful and charming phenomenon, during which her expression grew sweet and bewitchingly animated and her brown eyes radiant with mirthful light. It was not the same Beth at all.

Sometimes, when the nieces were all at Aunt Jane's, Beth had snuggled in the arms of her cousin Louise, who had a way of rendering herself agreeable to all with whom she came in contact, and tried hard to win the affection of the frankly antagonistic girl. At such times the gentleness of Elizabeth, her almost passionate desire to be loved and fondled, completely transformed her for the moment. Louise, shrewd at reading others, told herself that Beth possessed a reserve force of tenderness, amiability and fond devotion that would render her adorable if she ever allowed those qualities full expression. But she did not tell Beth that. The girl was so accustomed to despise herself and so suspicious of any creditable impulses that at times unexpectedly obtruded themselves, that she would have dismissed such a suggestion as arrant flattery, and Louise was clever enough not to wish to arouse her cousin to a full consciousness of her own possibilities.

The trained if not native indifference of this strange girl of fifteen was demonstrated by her reception of Uncle John's telegram. She quietly handed it to her mother and said, as calmly as if it were an invitation to a church picnic:

"I think I shall go."

"Nothing like that ever happened to me," remarked Mrs. De Graf, enviously. "If John Merrick had an atom of common sense he'd have taken me to Europe instead of a troop of stupid school girls. But John always was a fool, and always will be. When will you start, Beth?"

"To-morrow morning. There's nothing to keep me. I'll go to Patsy and stay with her until we sail."

"Are you glad?" asked her mother, looking into the expressionless face half curiously.

"Yes," returned Beth, as if considering her reply; "a change is always interesting, and I have never travelled except to visit Aunt Jane at Elmhurst. So I think I am pleased to go to Europe."

Mrs. De Graf sighed. There was little in common between mother and daughter; but that, to a grave extent, was the woman's fault. She had never tried to understand her child's complex nature, and somewhat resented Beth's youth and good looks, which she considered contrasted unfavorably with her own deepening wrinkles and graying hair. For Mrs. De Graf was vain and self-important, and still thought herself attractive and even girlish. It would really be a relief to have Beth out of the way for a few months.

The girl packed her own trunk and arranged for it to be taken to the station. In the morning she entered the music room to bid the Professor good-bye. He frowned at the interruption, for the oratorio was especially engrossing at the time. Mrs. De Graf kissed her daughter lightly upon the lips and said in a perfunctory way that she hoped Beth would have a good time.

The girl had no thought of resenting the lack of affection displayed by her parents. It was what she had always been accustomed to, and she had no reason to expect anything different.

Patsy met her at the train in New York and embraced her rapturously. Patsy was really fond of Beth; but it was her nature to be fond of everyone, and her cousin, escaping from her smacking and enthusiastic kisses, told herself that Patsy would have embraced a cat with the same spontaneous ecstasy. That was not strictly true, but there was nothing half hearted or halfway about Miss Doyle. If she loved you, there would never be an occasion for you to doubt the fact. It was Patsy's way.

Uncle John also was cordial in his greetings. He was very proud of his pretty niece, and discerning enough to realize there was a broad strata of womanliness somewhere in Elizabeth's undemonstrative character. He had promised himself to "dig it out" some day, and perhaps the European trip would give him his opportunity.

Patsy and Elizabeth shopped for the next few days most strenuously and delightfully. Sometimes their dainty cousin Louise joined them, and the three girls canvassed gravely their requirements for a trip that was as new to them as a flight to the moon. Naturally, they bought much that was unnecessary and forgot many things that would have been useful. You have to go twice to Europe to know what to take along.

Louise needed less than the others, for her wardrobe was more extensive and she already possessed all that a young girl could possibly make use of. This niece, the eldest of Uncle John's trio, was vastly more experienced in the ways of the world than the others, although as a traveller she had no advantage of them. Urged thereto by her worldly mother, she led a sort of trivial, butterfly existence, and her character was decidedly superficial to any close observer. Indeed, her very suavity and sweetness of manner was assumed, because it was so much more comfortable and effective to be agreeable than otherwise. She was now past seventeen years of age, tall and well formed, with a delicate and attractive face which, without being beautiful, was considered pleasant and winning. Her eyes were good, though a bit too shrewd, and her light brown hair was fluffy as spun silk. Graceful of carriage, gracious of manner, yet affecting a languor unsuited to her years, Louise Merrick was a girl calculated to draw from the passing throng glances of admiration and approval, and to convey the impression of good breeding and feminine cleverness.

All this, however, was outward. Neither Patsy nor Beth displayed any undue affection for their cousin, although all of the girls exhibited a fair amount of cousinly friendship for one another. They had once been thrown together under trying circumstances, when various qualities of temperament not altogether admirable were liable to assert themselves. Those events were too recent to be already forgotten, yet the girls were generous enough to be considerate of each others' failings, and had resolved to entertain no sentiment other than good will on the eve of their departure for such a charming outing as Uncle John had planned for them.

Mr. Merrick being a man, saw nothing radically wrong in the dispositions of any of his nieces. Their youth and girlishness appealed to him strongly, and he loved to have them by his side. It is true that he secretly regretted Louise was not more genuine, that Beth was so cynical and frank, and that Patsy was not more diplomatic. But he reflected that he had had no hand in molding their characters,

although he might be instrumental in improving them; so he accepted the girls as they were, thankful that their faults were not glaring, and happy to have found three such interesting nieces to cheer his old age.

At last the preparations were complete. Tuesday arrived, and Uncle John "corralled his females," as he expressed it, and delivered them safely on board the staunch and comfortable ocean greyhound known as the "Princess Irene," together with their bags and baggage, their flowers and fruits and candy boxes and all those other useless accessories to a voyage so eagerly thrust upon the departing travellers by their affectionate but ill-advised friends.

Mrs. Merrick undertook the exertion of going to Hoboken to see her daughter off, and whispered in the ear of Louise many worldly admonitions and such bits of practical advice as she could call to mind on the spur of the moment.

Major Gregory Doyle was there, pompous and straight of form and wearing an assumed smile that was meant to assure Patsy he was delighted at her going, but which had the effect of scaring the girl because she at first thought the dreadful expression was due to convulsions.

The Major had no admonitions for Patsy, but she had plenty for him, and gave him a long list of directions that would, as he said, cause him to "walk mighty sthraight" if by good luck he managed to remember them all.

Having made up his mind to let the child go to Europe, the old fellow allowed no wails or bemoanings to reach Patsy's ears to deprive her of a moment's joyful anticipation of the delights in store for her. He laughed and joked perpetually during that last day, and promised the girl that he would take a vacation while she was gone and visit his old colonel in Virginia, which she knew was the rarest pleasure he could enjoy. And now he stood upon the deck amusing them all with his quaint sayings and appearing so outwardly jolly and unaffected that only Patsy herself suspected the deep grief that was gripping his kindly old heart.

Uncle John guessed, perhaps, for he hugged the Major in a tight embrace, whispering that Patsy should be now, as ever, the apple of his eye and the subject of his most loving care.

"An' don't be forgetting to bring me the meerscham pipe from Sicily an' the leathern pocket-book from Florence," the Major said to Patsy, impressively. "It's little enough for ye to remember if ye go that way, an' to tell the truth I'm sending ye abroad just for to get them. An' don't be gettin' off the boat till it stops at a station; an' remember that Uncle John is full of rheumatics an' can't walk more n' thirty mile an hour, an' –"

"It's a slander," said Uncle John, stoutly. "I never had rheumatics in my life."

"Major," observed Patsy, her blue eyes full of tears but her lips trying to smile, "do have the tailor sponge your vest every Saturday. It's full of spots even now, and I've been too busy lately to look after you properly. You're – you're – just disgraceful, Major!"

"All ashore!" called a loud voice.

The Major gathered Patsy into an embrace that threatened to crush her, and then tossed her into Uncle John's arms and hurried away. Mrs. Merrick followed, with good wishes for all for a pleasant journey; and then the four voyagers pressed to the rail and waved their handkerchiefs frantically to those upon the dock while the band played vociferously and the sailors ran here and there in sudden excitement and the great ship left her moorings and moved with proud deliberation down the bay to begin her long voyage to Gibraltar and the blue waters of the Mediterranean.

CHAPTER IV

SOME NEW ACQUAINTANCES, AND A WARNING

For an inexperienced tourist Uncle John managed their arrangements most admirably. He knew nothing at all about ocean travel or what was the proper method to secure comfortable accommodations; but while most of the passengers were writing hurried letters in the second deck gallery, which were to be sent back by the pilot, Mr. Merrick took occasion to interview the chief steward and the deck steward and whatever other official he could find, and purchased their good will so liberally that the effect of his astute diplomacy was immediately apparent.

His nieces found that the sunniest deck chairs bore their names; the most desirable seats in the dining hall were theirs when, half famished because breakfast had been disregarded, they trooped in to luncheon; the best waiters on the ship attended to their wants, and afterward their cabins were found to be cosily arranged with every comfort the heart of maid could wish for.

At luncheon it was found that the steward had placed a letter before Uncle John's plate. The handwriting of the address Louise, who sat next her uncle, at once recognized as that of her mother; but she said nothing.

Mr. Merrick was amazed at the contents of the communication, especially as he had so recently parted with the lady who had written it.

It said: "I must warn you, John, that my daughter has just escaped a serious entanglement, and I am therefore more grateful than I can express that you are taking her far from home for a few weeks. A young man named Arthur Weldon – a son of the big railroad president, you know – has been paying Louise marked attentions lately; but I cautioned her not to encourage him because a rumor had reached me that he has quarrelled with his father and been disinherited. My informant also asserted that the young man is wild and headstrong and cannot be controlled by his parent; but he always seemed gentlemanly enough at our house, and my greatest objection to him is that he is not likely to inherit a dollar of his father's money. Louise and I decided to keep him dangling until we could learn the truth of this matter, for you can easily understand that with her exceptional attractions there is no object in Louise throwing herself away upon a poor man, or one who cannot give her a prominent position in society. Imagine my horror, John, when I discovered last evening that my only child, whom I have so fondly cherished, has ungratefully deceived me. Carried away by the impetuous avowals of this young scapegrace, whom his own father disowns, she has confessed her love for him – love for a pauper! – and only by the most stringent exercise of my authority have I been able to exact from Louise a promise that she will not become formally engaged to Arthur Weldon, or even correspond with him, until she has returned home. By that time I shall have learned more of his history and prospects, when I can better decide whether to allow the affair to go on. Of course I have hopes that in case my fears are proven to have been well founded, I can arouse Louise to a proper spirit and induce her to throw the fellow over. Meantime, I implore you, as my daughter's temporary guardian, not to allow Louise to speak of or dwell upon this young man, but try to interest her in other gentlemen whom you may meet and lead her to forget, if possible, her miserable entanglement. Consider a loving mother's feelings, John. Try to help me in this emergency, and I shall be forever deeply grateful."

"It's from mother, isn't it?" asked Louise, when he had finished reading the letter.

"Yes," he answered gruffly, as he crumpled the missive and stuffed it into his pocket.

"What does she say, Uncle?"

"Nothing but rubbish and nonsense. Eat your soup, my dear; it's getting cold."

The girl's sweet, low laughter sounded very pleasant, and served to calm his irritation. From her demure yet amused expression Uncle John guessed that Louise knew the tenor of her mother's

letter as well as if she had read it over his shoulder, and it comforted him that she could take the matter so lightly. Perhaps the poor child was not so deeply in love as her mother had declared.

He was greatly annoyed at the confidence Mrs. Merrick had seen fit to repose in him, and felt she had no right to burden him with any knowledge of such an absurd condition of affairs just as he was starting for a holiday. Whatever might be the truth of the girl's "entanglement," – and he judged that it was not all conveyed in Martha Merrick's subtle letter – Louise would surely be free and unhampered by either love or maternal diplomacy for some time to come. When she returned home her mother might conduct the affair to suit herself. He would have nothing to do with it in any way.

As soon as luncheon was finished they rushed for the deck, and you may imagine that chubby little Uncle John, with his rosy, smiling face and kindly eyes, surrounded by three eager and attractive girls of from fifteen to seventeen years of age, was a sight to compel the attention of every passenger aboard the ship.

It was found easy to make the acquaintance of the interesting group, and many took advantage of that fact; for Uncle John chatted brightly with every man and Patsy required no excuse of a formal introduction to confide to every woman that John Merrick was taking his three nieces to Europe to "see the sights and have the time of their lives."

Many of the business men knew well the millionaire's name, and accorded him great respect because he was so enormously wealthy and successful. But the little man was so genuinely human and unaffected and so openly scorned all toadyism that they soon forgot his greatness in the financial world and accepted him simply as a good fellow and an invariably cheerful comrade.

The weather was somewhat rough for the latter part of March – they had sailed the twenty-seventh – but the "Irene" was so staunch and rode the waves so gracefully that none of the party except Louise was at all affected by the motion. The eldest cousin, however, claimed to be indisposed for the first few days out, and so Beth and Patsy and Uncle John sat in a row in their steamer chairs, with the rugs tucked up to their waists, and kept themselves and everyone around them merry and light hearted.

Next to Patsy reclined a dark complexioned man of about thirty-five, with a long, thin face and intensely black, grave eyes. He was carelessly dressed and wore a flannel shirt, but there was an odd look of mingled refinement and barbarity about him that arrested the girl's attention. He sat very quietly in his chair, reserved both in speech and in manner; but when she forced him to talk he spoke impetuously and with almost savage emphasis, in a broken dialect that amused her immensely.

"You can't be American," she said.

"I am Sicilian," was the proud answer.

"That's what I thought; Sicilian or Italian or Spanish; but I'm glad it's Sicilian, which is the same as Italian. I can't speak your lingo myself," she continued, "although I am studying it hard; but you manage the English pretty well, so we shall get along famously together."

He did not answer for a moment, but searched her unconscious face with his keen eyes. Then he demanded, brusquely:

"Where do you go?"

"Why, to Europe," she replied, as if surprised.

"Europe? Pah! It is no answer at all," he responded, angrily. "Europe is big. To what part do you journey?"

Patsy hesitated. The magic word "Europe" had seemed to sum up their destination very effectively, and she had heretofore accepted it as sufficient, for the time being, at least. Uncle John had bought an armful of guide books and Baedekers, but in the hurry of departure she had never glanced inside them. To go to Europe had been enough to satisfy her so far, but perhaps she should have more definite knowledge concerning their trip. So she turned to Uncle John and said:

"Uncle, dear, to what part of Europe are we going?"

"What part?" he answered. "Why, it tells on the ticket, Patsy. I can't remember the name just now. It's where the ship stops, of course."

"That is Napoli," said the thin faced man, with a scarcely veiled sneer. "And then?"

"And then?" repeated Patsy, turning to her Uncle.

"Then? Oh, some confounded place or other that I can't think of. I'm not a time-table, Patsy; but the trip is all arranged, in beautiful style, by a friend of mine who has always wanted to go abroad, and so has the whole programme mapped out in his head."

"Is it in his head yet?" enquired Patsy, anxiously.

"No, dear; it's in the left hand pocket of my blue coat, all written down clearly. So what's the use of bothering? We aren't there yet. By and bye we'll get to Eu-rope an' do it up brown. Whatever happens, and wherever we go, it's got to be a spree and a jolly good time; so take it easy, Patsy dear, and don't worry."

"That's all right, Uncle," she rejoined, with a laugh. "I'm not worrying the least mite. But when folks ask us where we're going, what shall we say?"

"Eu-rope."

"And then?" mischievously.

"And then home again, of course. It's as plain as the nose on your face, Patsy Doyle, and a good bit straighter."

That made her laugh again, and the strange Italian, who was listening, growled a word in his native language. He wasn't at all a pleasant companion, but for that very reason Patsy determined to make him talk and "be sociable." By degrees he seemed to appreciate her attention, and always brightened when she came to sit beside him.

"You'll have to tell me your name, you know," she said to him; "because I can't be calling you 'Sir' every minute."

He glanced nervously around. Then he answered, slowly:

"I am called Valdi – Victor Valdi."

"Oh, that's a pretty name, Mr. Valdi – or should I say Signor?"

"You should."

"Do I pronounce it right?"

"No."

"Well, never mind if I don't; you'll know what I mean, and that I intend to be proper and polite," she responded, sweetly.

Beth, while she made fewer acquaintances than Patsy, seemed to have cast off her sullen reserve when she boarded the ship. In truth, the girl was really happy for the first time in her life, and it softened her so wonderfully and made her so attractive that she soon formed a select circle around her. A young lady from Cleveland, who had two big brothers, was impelled to introduce herself to Beth because of the young men's intense admiration for the girl's beautiful face. When it was found that they were all from Ohio, they formed a friendly alliance at once. Marion Horton was so frank and agreeable that she managed to draw out all that was best in Beth's nature, and the stalwart young Hortons were so shyly enthusiastic over this, their first trip abroad, that they inspired the girl with a like ardor, which resulted in the most cordial relations between them.

And it so happened that several other young men who chanced to be aboard the "Princess Irene" marked the Hortons' intimacy with Beth and insisted on being introduced by them, so that by the time Louise had conquered her *mal-de-mer* and appeared on deck, she found an admiring group around her cousin that included most of the desirable young fellows on the ship. Beth sat enthroned like a queen, listening to her courtiers and smiling encouragement now and then, but taking little part in the conversation herself because of her inexperience. Such adoration was new to the little country girl, and she really enjoyed it. Nor did the young men resent her silence. All that they wanted her to do, as Tom Horton tersely expressed it, was to "sit still and look pretty."

As for Uncle John, he was so delighted with Beth's social success that he adopted all the boys on the spot, and made them a part of what he called his family circle.

Louise, discovering this state of affairs, gave an amused laugh and joined the group. She was a little provoked that she had isolated herself so long in her cabin when there was interesting sport on deck; but having lost some valuable time she straightway applied herself to redeem the situation.

In the brilliance of her conversation, in her studied glances, in a thousand pretty ways that were skillfully rendered effective, she had a decided advantage over her more beautiful cousin. When Louise really desired to please she was indeed a charming companion, and young men are not likely to detect insincerity in a girl who tries to captivate them.

The result was astonishing to Uncle John and somewhat humiliating to Beth; for a new queen was presently crowned, and Louise by some magnetic power assembled the court around herself. Only the youngest Horton boy, in whose susceptible heart Beth's image was firmly enshrined, refused to change his allegiance; but in truth the girl enjoyed herself more genuinely in the society of one loyal cavalier than when so many were clamoring for her favors. The two would walk the deck together for hours without exchanging a single word, or sit together silently listening to the band or watching the waves, without the need, as Tom expressed it, of "jabbering every blessed minute" in order to be happy.

Patsy was indignant at the artfulness of Louise until she noticed that Beth was quite content; then she laughed softly and watched matters take their course, feeling a little sorry for the boys because she knew Louise was only playing with them.

The trip across the Atlantic was all too short. On the fifth of April they passed the Azores, running close to the islands of Fayal and San Jorge so that the passengers might admire the zigzag rows of white houses that reached from the shore far up the steep hillsides. On the sixth day they sighted Gibraltar and passed between the Moorish and Spanish lighthouses into the lovely waters of the Mediterranean. The world-famed rock was now disclosed to their eyes, and when the ship anchored opposite it Uncle John assisted his nieces aboard the lighter and took them for a brief excursion ashore.

Of course they rode to the fortress and wandered through its gloomy, impressive galleries, seeing little of the armament because visitors are barred from the real fortifications. The fortress did not seem especially impregnable and was, taken altogether, a distinct disappointment to them; but the ride through the town in the low basket phaetons was wholly delightful. The quaint, narrow streets and stone arches, the beautiful vistas of sea and mountain, the swarthy, dark-eyed Moors whose presence lent to the town an oriental atmosphere, and the queer market-places crowded with Spaniards, Frenchmen, Jews and red-coated English soldiers, altogether made up a panorama that was fascinating in the extreme.

But their stay was short, and after a rush of sightseeing that almost bewildered them they returned to the ship breathless but elated at having "seen an' done," as Uncle John declared, their first foreign port.

And now through waters so brightly blue and transparent that they aroused the girls' wonder and admiration, the good ship plowed her way toward the port of Naples, passing to the east of Sardinia and Corsica, which they viewed with eager interest because these places had always seemed so far away to them, and had now suddenly appeared as if by magic directly before their eyes.

Patsy and the big whiskered captain had become such good friends that he always welcomed the girl on his own exclusive deck, and this afternoon she sat beside him and watched the rugged panorama slip by.

"When will we get to Naples?" she asked.

"To-morrow evening, probably," answered the captain. "See, it is over in that direction, where the gray cloud appears in the sky."

"And what is the gray cloud, Captain?"

"I do not know," said he, gravely. "Perhaps smoke from Vesuvius. At Gibraltar we heard that the volcano is in an ugly mood, I hope it will cause you no inconvenience."

"Wouldn't it be fine if we could see an eruption!" exclaimed the girl.

The captain shook his head.

"Interesting, perhaps," he admitted; "but no great calamity that causes thousands of people to suffer can be called 'fine.'"

"Ah, that is true!" she said, quickly. "I had forgotten the suffering."

Next morning all the sky was thick with smoke, and the sun was hidden. The waters turned gray, too, and as they approached the Italian coast the gloom perceptibly increased. A feeling of uneasiness seemed to pervade the ship, and even the captain had so many things to consider that he had no time to converse with his little friend.

Signor Valdi forsook his deck chair for the first time and stood at the rail which overlooked the steerage with his eyes glued to the grim skies ahead. When Uncle John asked him what he saw he answered, eagerly:

"Death and destruction, and a loss of millions of lira to the bankrupt government. I know; for I have studied Etna for years, and Vesuvio is a second cousin to Etna."

"Hm," said Uncle John. "You seem pleased with the idea of an eruption."

The thin faced man threw a shrewd look from his dark eyes and smiled. Uncle John frowned at the look and stumped away. He was not at all easy in his own mind. He had brought three nieces for a holiday to this foreign shore, and here at the outset they were confronted by an intangible danger that was more fearful because it was not understood. It was enough to make his round face serious, although he had so strong an objection to unnecessary worry.

Afternoon tea was served on deck amidst an unusual quiet. People soberly canvassed the situation and remarked upon the fact that the darkness increased visibly as they neared the Bay of Naples. Beth couldn't drink her tea, for tiny black atoms fell through the air and floated upon the surface of the liquid. Louise retired to her stateroom with a headache, and found her white serge gown peppered with particles of lava dust which had fallen from the skies.

The pilot guided the ship cautiously past Capri and into the bay. The air was now black with volcanic dross and a gloom as of midnight surrounded them on every side. The shore, the mountain and the water of the bay itself were alike invisible.

CHAPTER V

VESUVIUS RAMPANT

It was Saturday night, the seventh day of April, nineteen hundred and six – a night never to be forgotten by those aboard the ship; a night which has its place in history.

At dinner the captain announced that he had dropped anchor at the Immacolatella Nuova, but at a safe distance from the shore, and that no passengers would be landed under any circumstances until the fall of ashes ceased and he could put his people ashore in a proper manner.

A spirit of unrest fell upon them all. Big Tom Horton whispered to Beth that he did not intend to leave her side until all danger was over. The deck was deserted, all the passengers crowding into the smoking room and saloons to escape the lava dust.

Few kept their rooms or ventured to sleep. At intervals a loud detonation from the volcano shook the air, and the mystery and awe of the enveloping gloom were so palpable as almost to be felt.

Toward midnight the wind changed, driving the cloud of ashes to the southward and sufficiently clearing the atmosphere to allow the angry glow of the crater to be distinctly seen. Now it shot a pillar of fire thousands of feet straight into the heavens; then it would darken and roll skyward great clouds that were illumined by the showers of sparks accompanying them.

The windows of every cabin facing the volcano were filled with eager faces, and in the smoking room Uncle John clasped Beth around the waist with one arm and Patsy with the other and watched the wonderful exhibition through the window with a grave and anxious face. Tom Horton had taken a position at one side of them and the dark Italian at the other. The latter assured Patsy they were in no danger whatever. Tom secretly hoped they were, and laid brave plans for rescuing Beth or perishing at her side. Louise chose to lie in her berth and await events with calm resignation. If they escaped she would not look haggard and hollow-eyed when morning came. If a catastrophe was pending she would have no power to prevent it.

It was four o'clock on Sunday morning when Vesuvius finally reached the climax of her travail. With a deep groan of anguish the mountain burst asunder, and from its side rolled a great stream of molten lava that slowly spread down the slope, consuming trees, vineyards and dwellings in its path and overwhelming the fated city of Bosco-Trecase.

Our friends marked the course of destruction by watching the thread of fire slowly wander down the mountain slope. They did not know of the desolation it was causing, but the sight was terrible enough to inspire awe in every breast.

The volcano was easier after that final outburst, but the black clouds formed thicker than ever, and soon obscured the sky again.

CHAPTER VI

UNDER A CLOUD

"After all," said Uncle John, next morning, "we may consider ourselves very lucky. Your parents might have come to Naples a hundred times, my dears, and your children may come a hundred times more, and yet never see the sights that have greeted us on our arrival. If the confounded old hill was bound to spout, it did the fair thing by spouting when we were around. Eh, Patsy?"

"I quite agree with you," said the girl. "I wouldn't have missed it for anything – if it really had to behave so."

"But you'll pay for it!" growled Signor Valdi, who had overheard these remarks. "You will pay for it with a thousand discomforts – and I'm glad that is so. Vesuvio is hell let loose; and it amuses you. Hundreds are lying dead and crushed; and you are lucky to be here. Listen," he dropped his voice to a whisper: "if these Neapolitans could see the rejoicing in my heart, they would kill me. And you? Pah! you are no better. You also rejoice – and they will welcome you to Naples. I have advice. Do not go on shore. It is useless."

They were all startled by this strange speech, and the reproof it conveyed made them a trifle uncomfortable; but Uncle John whispered that the man was mad, and to pay no attention to him.

Although ashes still fell softly upon the ship the day had somewhat lightened the gloom and they could see from deck the dim outlines of the shore. A crowd of boats presently swarmed around them, their occupants eagerly clamoring for passengers to go ashore, or offering fruits, flowers and souvenirs to any who might be induced to purchase. Their indifference to their own and their city's danger was astonishing. It was their custom to greet arriving steamers in this way, for by this means they gained a livelihood. Nothing short of absolute destruction seemed able to interfere with their established occupations.

A steam tender also came alongside, and after a cordial farewell to the ship's officers and their travelling acquaintances, Uncle John placed his nieces and their baggage aboard the tender, which shortly deposited them safely upon the dock.

Perhaps a lot of passengers more dismal looking never before landed on the beautiful shores of Naples – beautiful no longer, but presenting an appearance gray and grewsome. Ashes were ankle deep in the streets – a fine, flour-like dust that clung to your clothing, filled your eyes and lungs and seemed to penetrate everywhere. The foliage of the trees and shrubbery drooped under its load and had turned from green to the all-pervading gray. The grass was covered; the cornices and balconies of the houses were banked with ashes.

"Bless me!" said Uncle John. "It's as bad as Pompey, or whatever that city was called that was buried in the Bible days."

"Oh, not quite, Uncle," answered Patsy, in her cheery voice; "but it may be, before Vesuvius is satisfied."

"It is certainly bad enough," observed Louise, pouting as she marked the destruction of her pretty cloak by the grimy deposit that was fast changing its color and texture.

"Well, let us get under shelter as soon as possible," said Uncle John.

The outlines of a carriage were visible a short distance away. He walked up to the driver and said:

"We want to go to a hotel."

The man paid no attention.

"Ask him how much he charges, Uncle. You know you mustn't take a cab in Naples without bargaining."

"Why not?"

"The driver will swindle you."

"I'll risk that," he answered. "Just now we're lucky if we get a carriage at all." He reached up and prodded the jehu in the ribs with his cane. "How much to the Hotel Vesuvius?" he demanded, loudly.

The man woke up and flourished his whip, at the same time bursting into a flood of Italian.

The girls listened carefully. They had been trying to study Italian from a small book Beth had bought entitled "Italian in Three Weeks without a Master," but not a word the driver of the carriage said seemed to have occurred in the vocabulary of the book. He repeated "Vesuvio" many times, however, with scornful, angry or imploring intonations, and Louise finally said:

"He thinks you want to go to the volcano, Uncle. The hotel is the Vesuve, not the Vesuvius."

"What's the difference?"

"I don't know."

"All right; you girls just hop in, and leave the rest to me."

He tumbled them all into the vehicle, bag and baggage, and then said sternly to the driver:

"Ho-tel Ve-suve – Ve-suve – ho-tel Ve-suve! Drive there darned quick, or I'll break your confounded neck."

The carriage started. It plowed its way jerkily through the dust-laden streets and finally stopped at an imposing looking structure. The day was growing darker, and an electric lamp burned before the entrance. But no one came out to receive them.

Uncle John climbed out and read the sign. "Hotel du Vesuve." It was the establishment he had been advised to stop at while in Naples. He compared the sign with a card which he drew from his pocket, and knew that he had made no mistake.

Entering the spacious lobby, he found it deserted. In the office a man was hastily making a package of some books and papers and did not respond or even look up when spoken to. At the concierge's desk a big, whiskered man sat staring straight ahead of him with a look of abject terror in his eyes.

"Good morning," said Uncle John. "Fine day, isn't it?"

"Did you hear it?" whispered the concierge, as a dull boom, like that of a distant cannon, made the windows rattle in their casements.

"Of course," replied Mr. Merrick, carelessly. "Old Vesuve seems on a rampage. But never mind that now. We've just come from America, where the mountains are more polite, and we're going to stop at your hotel."

The concierge's eyes wandered from the man to the three girls who had entered and grouped themselves behind him. Then they fell upon the driver of the carriage, who burst into a torrent of vociferous but wholly unintelligible exclamations which Uncle John declared "must be an excuse – and a mighty poor one – for talking."

The whiskered man, whose cap was elaborately embroidered in gold with the words "Hotel du Vesuve," seemed to understand the driver. He sighed drearily and said to Mr. Merrick:

"You must pay him thirty lira."

"How much is that?"

"Six dollars."

"Not by a jugfull!"

"You made no bargain."

"I couldn't. He can't talk."

"He claims it is you who cannot talk."

"What!"

"And prices are advanced during these awful days. What does it matter? Your money will do you no good when we are all buried deep in ash and scoria."

The big man shuddered at this gloomy picture, and added, listlessly: "You'll have to pay."

Uncle John paid, but the driver wouldn't accept American money. The disconsolate concierge would, though. He unlocked a drawer, put the six dollars into one section and drew from another two ten-lira notes. The driver took them, bowed respectfully to the whiskered man, shot a broadside of invective Italian at the unconscious Americans, and left the hotel.

"How about rooms?" asked Uncle John.

"Take any you please," answered the concierge. "All our guests are gone but two – two mad Americans like yourselves. The servants are also gone; the chef has gone; the elevator conductors are gone. If you stay you'll have to walk up."

"Where have they all gone?" asked Uncle John, wonderingly.

"Fled, sir; fled to escape destruction. They remember Pompeii. Only Signor Floriano, the proprietor, and myself are left. We stick to the last. We are brave."

"So I see. Now, look here, my manly hero. It's possible we shall all live through it; I'll bet you a thousand to ten that we do. And then you'll be glad to realize you've pocketed a little more American money. Come out of that box and show us some rooms, and I'll help to build up your fortune."

The concierge obeyed. Even the horrors of the situation could not eliminate from his carefully trained nature that desire to accumulate which is the prime qualification of his profession. The Americans walked up one flight and found spacious rooms on the first floor, of which they immediately took possession.

"Send for our trunks," said Mr. Merrick; and the man consented to do so provided he could secure a proper vehicle.

"You will be obliged to pay high for it," he warned; "but that will not matter. To witness the destruction of our beautiful Naples is an unusual sight. It will be worth your money."

"We'll settle that in the dim hereafter," replied Uncle John. "You get the trunks, and I'll take care of the finances."

When the concierge had retired the girls began to stuff newspapers into the cracks of the windows of their sitting room, where the fine ash was sifting in and forming little drifts several inches in thickness. Also the atmosphere of the room was filled with impalpable particles of dust, which rendered breathing oppressive and unpleasant.

Uncle John watched them for a time, and his brow clouded.

"See here, girls," he exclaimed; "let's hold a council of war. Do you suppose we are in any real danger?"

They grouped around him with eager interest.

"It's something new to be in danger, and rather exciting, don't you think?" said Beth. "But perhaps we're as safe as we would be at home."

"Once," said Louise, slowly, "there was a great eruption of Vesuvius which destroyed the cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii. Many of the inhabitants were buried alive. Perhaps they thought there was no real danger."

Uncle John scratched his head reflectively.

"I take it," he observed, "that the moral of your story is to light out while we have the chance."

"Not necessarily," observed the girl, smiling at his perplexity. "It is likewise true that many other eruptions have occurred, when little damage was done."

"Forewarned is forearmed," declared Patsy. "Naples isn't buried more than six inches in ashes, as yet, and it will take days for them to reach to our windows, provided they're falling at the same rate they do now. I don't see any use of getting scared before to-morrow, anyhow."

"It's a big hill," said Uncle John, gravely, "and I've no right to take foolish chances with three girls on my hands."

"I'm not frightened, Uncle John."

"Nor I."

"Nor I, the least bit."

"Everyone has left the hotel but ourselves," said he.

"How sorry they will be, afterward," remarked Beth.

He looked at them admiringly, and kissed each one.

"You stay in this room and don't move a peg till I get back," he enjoined them; "I'm going out to look over the situation."

CHAPTER VII

A FRIEND IN NEED

Some of Mr. Merrick's business friends in New York, hearing of his proposed trip, had given him letters of introduction to people in various European cities. He had accepted them – quite a bunch, altogether – but had firmly resolved not to use them. Neither he nor the nieces cared to make superficial acquaintances during their wanderings. Yet Uncle John chanced to remember that one of these letters was to a certain Colonel Angeli of the Twelfth Italian Regiment, occupying the barracks on the Pizzofalcone hill at Naples. This introduction, tendered by a relative of the Colonel's American wife, was now reposing in Mr. Merrick's pocket, and he promptly decided to make use of it in order to obtain expert advice as to the wisdom of remaining in the stricken city.

Enquiring his way from the still dazed concierge, he found that the Pizzofalcone barracks were just behind the hotel but several hundred feet above it; so he turned up the Strada St. Lucia and soon came upon the narrow lane that wound upward to the fortifications. It was a long and tedious climb in the semi-darkness caused by the steady fall of ashes, and at intervals the detonations from Vesuvius shook the huge rock and made its massive bulk seem insecure. But the little man persevered, and finally with sweating brow arrived at the barracks.

A soldier carried in the letter to his colonel and presently returned to usher Uncle John through the vast building, up a flight of steps, and so to a large covered balcony suspended many hundred feet above the Via Partenope, where the hotel was situated.

Here was seated a group of officers, watching intently the cloud that marked the location of the volcano. Colonel Angeli, big and bluff, his uniform gorgeous, his dark, heavy moustaches carefully waxed, his handsome face as ingenuous and merry as a schoolboy's, greeted the American with a gracious courtesy that made Uncle John feel quite at his ease. When he heard of the nieces the Italian made a grimace and then laughed.

"I am despairing, signore," said he, in English sufficiently strangled to be amusing but nevertheless quite comprehensible, "that you and the sweet signorini are to see our lovely Naples under tribulations so very great. But yesterday, in all the world is no city so enchanting, so brilliant, so gay. To-day – look! is it not horrible? Vesuvio is sick, and Naples mourns until the tyrant is well again."

"But the danger," said Uncle John. "What do you think of the wisdom of our staying here? Is it safe to keep my girls in Naples during this eruption?"

"Ah! Why not? This very morning the mountain asunder burst, and we who love our people dread the news of devastation we shall hear. From the observatory, where His Majesty's faithful servant still remains, come telegrams that the great pebbles – what we call scoria – have ruined Ottajano and San Guiseppe. Perhaps they are overwhelmed. But the beast has vomited; he will feel better now, and ever become more quiet."

"I suppose," remarked Mr. Merrick, thoughtfully, "that no one knows exactly what the blamed hill may do next. I don't like to take chances with three girls on my hands. They are a valuable lot, Colonel, and worth saving."

The boyish Italian instantly looked grave. Then he led Uncle John away from the others, although doubtless he was the only officer present able to speak or understand English, and said to him:

"Where are you living?"

"At the hotel named after your sick mountain – the Vesuve."

"Very good. In the bay, not distant from your hotel, lies a government launch that is under my command. At my home in the Viala Elena are a wife and two children, who, should danger that is serious arise, will be put by my soldiers on the launch, to carry them to safety. Admirable, is it not?"

"Very good arrangement," said Uncle John.

"It renders me content to know that in any difficulty they cannot be hurt. I am not scare, myself, but it is pleasant to know I have what you call the side that is safe. From my American wife I have many of your excellent speech figures. But now! The launch is big. Remain happy in Naples – happy as Vesuvio will let you – and watch his vast, his gigantic exhibition. If danger come, you all enter my launch and be saved. If no danger, you have a marvelous experience." The serious look glided from his face, and was replaced by a smile as bright as before.

"Thank you very much," responded Uncle John, gratefully. "I shall go back to the girls well satisfied."

"Make the signorini stay in to-day," warned the colonel. "It is bad, just now, and so black one can nothing at all observe. To-morrow it will be better, and all can go without. I will see you myself, then, and tell you what to do."

Then he insisted that Uncle John clear his parched throat with a glass of vermouth – a harmless drink of which all Italians are very fond – and sent him away much refreshed in body and mind.

He made his way through the ashy rain back to the hotel. People were holding umbrellas over their heads and plodding through the dust with seeming unconcern. At one corner a street singer was warbling, stopping frequently to cough the lava dust from his throat or shake it from his beloved mandolin. A procession of peasants passed, chanting slowly and solemnly a religious hymn. At the head of the column was borne aloft a gilded statuette of the Virgin, and although Uncle John did not know it, these simple folks were trusting in the sacred image to avert further disaster from the angry mountain.

On arriving home Mr. Merrick told the girls with great elation of his new friend, and how they were to be taken aboard the launch in case of emergency.

"But how will we know when danger threatens?" asked Louise.

While Uncle John tried to think of an answer to this puzzling query someone knocked upon the door. The concierge was standing in the passage and beside him was a soldier in uniform, a natty cock's plume upon his beaver hat and a short carbine over his arm.

"A guard from Colonel Angeli, Signor," said the concierge, respectfully – the first respectful tone he had yet employed.

The soldier took off his hat with a flourish, and bowed low.

"He is to remain in the hotel, sir, yet will not disturb you in any way," continued the whiskered one. "But should he approach you at any time and beckon you to follow him, do so at once, and without hesitation. It is Colonel Angeli's wish. You are in the charge of this brave man, who will watch over your welfare."

"That settles it, my dears," said Uncle John, cheerfully, when the soldier and the concierge had withdrawn. "This Italian friend doesn't do things by halves, and I take it we are perfectly safe from this time on."

CHAPTER VIII

ACROSS THE BAY

Tom Horton called an hour later. He was in despair because his party had decided to leave Naples for Rome, and he feared Beth would be engulfed by the volcano unless he was present to protect her.

"Mr. Merrick," said the boy, earnestly, "you'll take good care of Miss De Graf, sir, won't you? We both live in Ohio, you know, and we've just got acquainted; and – and I'd like to see her again, some time, if she escapes."

Uncle John's eyes twinkled, but he drew a long face.

"My dear Tom," he said, "don't ask me to take care of anyone – please don't! I brought these girls along to take care of *me*– three of 'em, sir – and they've got to do their duty. Don't you worry about the girls; just you worry about *me*."

That was not much consolation for the poor fellow, but he could do nothing more than wring their hands – Beth's twice, by mistake – and wish them good luck before he hurried away to rejoin his family.

"I'm sorry to see him go," said Beth, honestly. "Tom is a nice boy."

"Quite right," agreed Uncle John. "I hope we shall meet no worse fellows than Tom Horton."

At noon they were served a modest luncheon in their rooms, for Signor Floriano, having sent his important papers to a place of safety, had resolved to stick to his hotel and do his duty by any guests that chose to remain with him in defiance of the existent conditions. He had succeeded in retaining a few servants who had more courage than those that had stampeded at the first alarm, and while the hotel service for the next few days was very inadequate, no one was liable to suffer any great privation.

During the afternoon the gloom grew denser than before, while thicker than ever fell the rain of ashes. This was the worst day Naples experienced during the great eruption, and Uncle John and his nieces were content to keep their rooms and live in the glare of electric lights. Owing to their wise precautions to keep out the heavily laden air they breathed as little lava dust into their lungs as any people, perhaps, in the city; but to escape all was impossible. Their eyes and throats became more or less inflamed by the floating atoms, and the girls declared they felt as if they were sealed up in a tomb.

"Well, my chickens, how do you like being abroad, and actually in Europe?" enquired Uncle John, cheerfully.

Beth and Patsy smiled at him, but Louise looked up from the Baedeker she was studying and replied:

"It's simply delightful, Uncle, and I'm glad we happened here during this splendid eruption of Vesuvius. Only – only –"

"Only what, my dear?"

"Only it is such hard work to keep clean," answered his dainty niece. "Even the water is full of lava, and I'm sure my face looks like a chimney-sweep's."

"And you, Beth?"

"I don't like it, Uncle. I'm sure I'd prefer Naples in sunshine, although this is an experience we can brag about when we get home."

"That is the idea, exactly," said Louise, "and the only thing that reconciles me to the discomforts. Thousands see Naples in sunshine, but few can boast seeing Vesuvius in eruption. It will give us considerable prestige when we return home."

"Ah, that is why I selected this time to bring you here," declared Uncle John, with a comical wink. "I ordered the eruption before I left home, and I must say they've been very prompt about it, and done the thing up brown. Eh, Patsy?"

"Right you are, Uncle. But you might tell 'em to turn off the eruption now, because we've had enough."

"Don't like Eu-rope, eh?"

"Why, if I thought all Europe was surrounded by volcanoes, I'd go home at once, if I had to walk. But the geographies don't mention many of these spouters, so we may as well stick out our present experience and hope the rest of the continent will behave better. The Major'll be worried to death when he hears of this."

"I've sent him a cable," said Uncle John.

"What did you say?" asked Patsy, eagerly.

"All safe and well and enjoying the fireworks."

"I'm glad you did that," replied the girl, deeply grateful at this evidence of thoughtfulness. "It's bad enough for the Major to have me away, without making him worry, into the bargain."

"Well, no one is likely to worry about me," said Beth, philosophically.

"Mother seldom reads the papers, except to get the society news," remarked Louise. "I doubt if she'll hear of the eruption, unless the Major happens to tell her."

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