

## TRUE TO HIS WORD.

A NOVEL.

## CHAPTER XXX.

## ON THE ROAD.

As Walter's feet beat quickly on the hard road, something seemed also to beat within his brain. At first fear was dominant—fear, not upon his own account at all; when a man is hopeless he feels no fear. If Lillian had ever been within his reach, or even if she had promised herself to him in the case, however improbable, of her father giving consent to their union, life would have been inexpressibly dear to Walter, and he would have shrunk from losing it. It was a pleasure to be thus risking it for her sweet sake, and scarcely to be counted as a sacrifice; it might be valuable just now to her, and therefore it behoved him to preserve it. He looked therefore sharply to left and right, and kept the middle of the road, as Francisco had advised him to do.

Though using as much caution as he could, his footsteps rang out in the silence, and must needs give notice of his approach to any one on the watch. Presently he heard sound from the hilly ground, which was in that part covered with scrub—low trees with a thick undergrowth; a sharp hissing noise. He stopped a moment to listen, and it was repeated farther on, and therefore less clearly. It might very well proceed from some bird or even insect, with the nature of which he was unacquainted; yet it startled him, and he increased his speed, keeping more to the orchard side of the road. In this he erred, for at that moment a man clothed in sheepskin and with a gun in his hand sprang out from it, exclaiming something which was probably an equivalent for the old British "Stand, sir!"

Walter had been an idle man at college, but had learned something from an outside professor, who taught self-defence. No sooner had this wolf in sheep's clothing thus addressed him than, seizing the barrel of the gun with one hand, he knocked him down with the other. At the same moment the low wall on the other side of the road became a parapet for gun barrels—one, two, three, four; he could count them as they shone dull and cold in the moonlight; and again the warning cry, "Stand, sir!" rang out, as it seemed, from half a dozen mouths. Walter's reply was to bound forward like an antelope. "They do not shoot well, flying, these gentlemen," were the words that rang in his ears with a storm of bullets. One of them stung his cheek, and he could feel the hot blood running down it; but it only acted like a spur. Never, even when he carried off "the Pewter" in the university flat race two years (it seemed two centuries) ago, had he ever laid foot to ground so nimbly. Perhaps the guns came from Birmingham, but in any case they were not breech loaders nor double-barrelled; they had advanced all the leaden arguments they had to urge, and he had got clean away for that time, at all events; only what troubled him was that that soft sibilant noise was repeated and repeated again, far, far in front of him. It was the system of telegraphy used by the brigands.

This attempt to intercept him had been made within a few hundred yards of a large village, which a turn of the road now revealed to him. Walter took it as a matter of course that herein he would find succour and sympathy, even if he should be unable to procure a vehicle to carry him the remainder of his journey. But either the inhabitants were unanimous in their habits of early retirement, or what he began to think the likelier, the noise of the brigands' guns had induced them to shrink into their shells and simulate slumber. Not a single reply did he extract in answer to repeated summons till he reached the principal inn, still here, in an upstairs window, a light was still burning. Here the master of the establishment was so good as to come out to him in person, appearing in a large white cap, in which he might either have been cooking or sleeping. There was no meat in the house, he observed with great volubility, and without giving Walter time to name his wants; nothing indeed to eat but macaroni. If the signor did not require food so much the better; but seeing him to be an Englishman his mind had naturally flown to meat.

"Have you no eyes?" interrupted Walter impatiently. "Can you not see that my cheek is bleeding? I have just been way-laid by brigands."

"Heavens! Is it possible? Brigands?"

"It is quite possible, as one would have thought you could believe, since it happened just outside your town. However, I want nothing from you but the means of getting away from it. I must have a carriage of some kind in which to get to Palermo. These scoundrels have captured an English lady and her father, and every mo-

ment is precious. Just give me a basin and some water while the horses are being harnessed."

Walter would not even enter the house, but stood at the door while he washed his wound, which turned out to be little more than a scratch.

"Now, when is that carriage coming round?"

He had seen one in the yard that adjoined the inn.

"You are welcome to the carriage, signor; but, alas! we have no horses, nor do I believe that there is one in the place. Two gentlemen have just stopped here with a tired pair from Termini, which we were unable to replace."

"From Termini? Why, that is the way I have come! Did they not meet any molestation?"

"No, indeed, signor," answered the innkeeper with a smile of incredulity that seemed to say: "Young gentlemen get scratches from other things beside musket balls." "They certainly did not mention that they had been shot at."

"Well, I have been shot at," observed Walter with irritation; "and I must get on to Palermo—those two things are certain."

That his host was indisposed to offer him any assistance and anxious to get rid of him there was no doubt; and what Baccari had told him of the fear inspired in the villages by the brigands convinced Walter of the reason.

"You do not seem very hospitable, my friend," said he severely; "and I shall make it my business, when I reach my journey's end, to let the police know how you have treated me. Where there is a carriage for hire there are mostly horses."

"There are none here," interrupted the landlord sullenly; "but if the signor can make good use of his legs he cannot fail to catch the vehicle of which I have spoken, since the road is hilly, and it can scarcely move out of a foot pace."

The suggestion was not inviting; but as there seemed no alternative Walter turned with an exclamation, which, being in pure Saxon, let us hope the innkeeper imagined to be a farewell blessing, and recommenced his journey. He had recovered his breath, and felt altogether "like running." If any Sicilian eyes were watching him through the closed shutters as he moved lightly up the street, they would have seen what was probably a rarity to them—an English athlete in "good form." For speed and endurance, few amateurs could touch him. The road, though it turned inland, was now much more open; he could see not only around him but before him; and presently he beheld just disappearing at the top of a steep hill some slow-moving vehicle. What delighted him most, however, was the sight of a wagonette and pair, with two men in it, which had just passed the bridge, and was making its way up the opposite hill.

As he ran down towards it at the top of his speed, he fancied he heard once again the sibilant noise run, like some light substance that rapidly catches fire, along the firs upon the left hand; but it might well have been the noise in his ears produced by his rapid progress; and, at all events, with help so near there was no occasion for giving attention to it. The occupants of the carriage seemed to have heard it too, for, to his great joy, he saw it stop, and one man stood up in it, as if to look behind. Walter had no breath to waste in calling, but he drew out his white handkerchief as he ran on to attract attention; and in this it seemed he had succeeded, for he saw the man making gestures to him; and in a few minutes more he found himself by the door of the wagonette.

Two Sicilians, not of the upper ranks, as it seemed to him, though they were somewhat profusely decorated with chains and jewellery, were its occupants, and he who had been standing up addressed him in courteous tones.

"Do you want a lift, signor?" inquired he.

"Indeed, I do," said Walter, not waiting for a more formal invitation, but at once climbing up into the nearest seat. "I am pursued and in trouble. Pray, tell your coachman to drive on, and I will tell you all as we go along."

At a word from the man who had addressed him, the driver touched the horses with his whip, and off they went, though at a rate so slow that a London cabman taken by the hour would have been ashamed of it.

While Walter was recovering his breath, he took an observation of his companions. The general impression which his first hurried glance had given him of their "dressy" appearance was more than confirmed; if they had been Londoners he would have set them down as belonging to

the swell mob, or rather they were more like the representatives of that class in faroes. They wore billy cock hats, rather taller in the crown than those commonly seen in England; shooting jackets of a burnt sienna color—so it seemed by the moonlight—with enormous pockets both inside and out, such as poachers and gamekeepers use. So far their dress was "quiet" enough; but their waistcoats, which were of blue cloth, were covered with gilt buttons, sewn on like those of pages, not for use, but show, and positively festooned with gold or gilt chains. To the shooting jackets were attached a sort of hood, to throw over the head in case of rain; and round each man's waist was a broad belt, with a shot or cartridge pouch depending from it. Under the seat opposite to Walter was a long gun, and he conjectured rightly that its fellow lay beneath him. Upon the whole, he came to the conclusion that these men were small trades people, who had gone out for a holiday, in which sport—or what they thought to be so—had formed a principal feature. They had probably been shooting tomtits.

"If you could get your coachman to drive a little quicker," said Walter, "I should feel more comfortable while telling you my story; first, because it is of the utmost importance to me to get to Palermo as soon as possible; secondly, because, as I believe, we are upon dangerous ground."

"Dangerous ground!" laughed he who seemed to take the lead as a superior mind. "When did that come into your head, Signor Inglese?"

"I am perfectly serious, gentlemen," said Walter gravely; "and not only did the circumstance happen which I have described, but a whole band of these rascals have boarded an English gentleman's boat in the bay over yonder, and carried both himself and his daughter into captivity. My object is to give the alarm as soon as possible, that measures may be taken for their release."

"Naturally," answered he who sat on the same seat with Walter, "if the Englishman is a person of consequence, they will probably send the troops after him immediately."

"Just so; that is the plan I hope will be adopted. But in the meantime, I repeat, I wish we could move a little faster. I would gladly bear the whole expense of the wagonette if I might be allowed to have my way in this particular."

"That is impossible, Signor Inglese," answered the other with a courteous inclination of his head. "We are proud to be able to do you this small service. And as for brigands there are none so near Palermo as this—I do assure you."

"And yet I could almost swear I heard them signalling to one another not five minutes ago, down there," argued Walter, pointing towards the bridge. "It was a cry like this;" and he proceeded to imitate it, not, it must be confessed, with great success. The attempt, however, excited the boisterous mirth of his companions.

"The signor must have heard the night-ingleses," said one.

"Or the echo of his last parting from his mistress must have been still ringing in his ears," observed the other. "As for the brigands, what have we to fear, who carry guns. Would the signor like to take one for himself?" and he motioned to that which lay under the opposite seat.

Nothing loath to be armed in case of the worst, Walter stooped down to pick up the gun, when a heavy weight fell violently upon his shoulders, and he found himself face foremost upon the floor of the vehicle. He struggled violently to free himself, but the space was too confined for him to throw off the man who had leaped upon him; and in less than a minute his confederate had attached a rope to his outstretched wrists and fastened them firmly behind his back. When he was suffered to rise the carriage had stopped, and the steps were already let down behind.

"Scende," said one of his captors sentimentally.

"Coachman," cried Walter, "you will bear witness what these men have done, and where they did it; they are brigands!"

Here something cold touched the tip of Walter's ear; it was the muzzle of a pistol. "If the signor speaks again he dies," said the voice that had addressed him so often. It was still quiet, and even courteous, but very firm.

Walter called to mind Francisco's advice about submission should he fall into brigands' hands, and was silent. It was not likely, where deeds were impossible, that words should avail him. The driver too, it was now plain, was either in league with these men or was afraid to oppose their wishes in any respect; he had never once turned round, so as to show his face, and now he drove away, leaving his three fares in the road, with the same precaution.

"Your name?" inquired the man who had taken the lead in the wagonette, while the others stood round in an attitude of respectful attention.

"My name is Walter Litton; my profession that of a painter; I am an English

subject. To what money I have about me you are welcome; and I swear that I will never give evidence against you if you will only let me go free. Otherwise this outrage will not pass unpunished."

"The young cock crows loudly," observed the other, laughing.

"Well, signor, you have told me your name, and now I will tell you mine. If you have heard it before it will teach you what to expect and how idle are all these ridiculous menaces. If you have not heard it you will soon come to know me—I am Il Capitano Corrali."

## CHAPTER XXXI.

## OUTDOOR LODGINGS.

Walter Litton had great courage; but a cold chill swept for an instant across his heart when he heard into whose power he had fallen. A hundred stories of the cruelty of the brigand chief, which he had heard while in Palermo, not only from Baccari, but many others—for among the poorer class this man's crimes were the favorite topic of talk—and which he had disbelieved and laughed at, now returned to him with terrible force. There was a house in the town where the chin and gray beard of an old man were shown, which Corrali had sent in to his family as a token that he would "not be trifled with," which was his phrase when a victim either could not or would not pay the price that had been fixed upon as his ransom. Up to this moment Walter had discredited that ghastly trophy—which was an exhibition for money—but he did not feel so sceptical now. A rich man was comparatively safe from death and torture; it was the poor, whom Corrali persisted in believing rich, who suffered, and Walter himself was poor. Those upon whose account he had fallen into this trap were sure to be released (as he concluded) as soon as the extent of their captor's demands was known; but for him there was no such surety. All the money—at all events, all the available money—he had in the world was some seventy or eighty pounds, which was in his lodgings at Palermo. He had no credit at any banker's, nor was he known to a single influential person. The precautions he had taken to conceal himself were like to bear bitter fruit indeed. It was only too probable that he would be butchered up in yonder mountains without so much as a single fellow-countryman being aware of his sad fate. Even if Sir Reginald—the only man who could at present help him—were informed of his danger, it was doubtful if he would stir in the matter; doubtful even whether he would ever let Lillian know that he had suffered captivity and death. Once again Walter gazed—but with what infinitely greater interest than before—upon his late companion in the wagonette, upon his present master and disposer of his life and fortunes. He was a man of middle size and quite young, perhaps thirty at the most; fair for a Sicilian, and by no means ill looking; he had blue eyes, not soft, as eyes of that color mostly are, but stern and steel-like; he had a long and curling beard, which he was now stroking irresolutely with his dirty but bejewelled hand.

"Your wrists will be unbound, Signor Inglese," said he in courteous tones, "because we have to make a rapid march, but you will be none the more free on that account. On the first symptom of an attempt to escape or to speak with any whom we may chance to meet you will be shot. I never speak twice upon this point, so lay my words to heart. You can run, I know, but not so fast as a bullet flies.—Santoro, Colletta!" At these words two of the tallest of the band came forward. "You have heard what I say, and are answerable for this gentleman's safety." The two men ranged themselves one upon each side of Walter, and at the same time the rope was cut that bound his wrists. Then Corrali pointed to the mountain before them and said "Forward!"

Bonds to the free man are what dependence is to the noble mind; other outrages—a blow or an insult—rouse indignation, audacity; but not these; they render their victim apathetic, hopeless. No sooner did Walter find himself master of his own wrists than he felt another man again—himself; and therefore he at once began to think of others. Perhaps he was going to be taken to Lillian; it might be even to show himself of use to her, notwithstanding his apparent forlorn condition. This put new blood in his veins. A broad ditch intervened between the cope into which they were about to enter and the road; the brigands began to scramble through it; but Walter took it in a bound, then, fortunately for himself, halted on the other side. A couple of sharp clicks informed him that his guard had cocked their guns.

"Do not waste your energies, young man," exclaimed Corrali in a cynical tone; "you will require all your strength before you reach home to-night."

At the time Walter did not attach much meaning to these words; the ease with which he had outstripped his pursuers after leaving the boat, and the inability of his present companions to leap the ditch, gave

him no very high idea of brigand agility; but what they wanted in spring and swiftness he soon found out was more than compensated for by their powers of endurance. Their rate of progress, though not very rapid, had something of "that long gallop, which can tire the hound's hate and hunter's fire," which is the attribute of the wolf; they never halted, or seemed to require rest. On and on they pushed, through woods, through fields, and presently up the sides of the mountain, without any abatement of their speed. Walter was at a great disadvantage as to physical exertion, since he had had no sleep, whereas the brigands rest in the day, and only move, unless closely pursued, at night time. He was too proud, however, especially after what the captain had said, to own himself fatigued, and he hurried on with the rest without a word. But how, thought he, had it been possible for these men—or rather their confederates, for, if belonging to the same band, they could hardly have been the same individuals—to carry off Christopher Brown and his delicate daughter? It was torture to him to think what hardships they must have undergone if the circumstances of their capture had been in any way similar to his own. Had Corrali himself been present at it? he wondered; for that well might be, since his carriage had been coming from the direction of the yacht; and if so, to whose guardianship had they been now deputed? Upon such a matter it was injudicious to ask any questions. His best plan seemed to be to remain silent, and to acquire all the information he could by observation.

Throughout that rapid march he beheld but two individuals, shepherds in sheepskin, but each with a species of greatcoat furnished with a capote, like those worn by the brigands. He was hurried rapidly by them; nor did they so much as look up as he passed, being probably as anxious to avoid recognition from him as his captors were to keep him from their sight. The whole circumstances of the case were evidently as well understood on one side as on the other. This incident took place when they had almost reached the top of the mountain, by which time Walter was quite exhausted, as much by famine as fatigue, for he had eaten nothing since he left Palermo in the early evening.

At last the spot was arrived at which Corrali had intimated from the road three hours ago. It was in many respects admirably fitted for a brigand camp, for not only was it the highest ground in those parts, so that the whole country lay like a map around it, but it sloped down steeply into woods on all sides, so that retreat and concealment were made easy. There was a level plateau of turf upon the summit, with just enough trees to screen its tenants from the observation of those below. The panorama was magnificent, and ranged from the snow-capped top of Etna on the one hand to Palermo and the sea upon the other. Santoro, a man with thoughtful features that would have been handsome but for a deep scar on one side of his face, pointed out the view to his prisoner with great politeness, just as an English host might draw a guest's attention to his home landscape.

"It is beautiful, is it not?" said he. "As the signor is a painter he will appreciate it."

"There are three things, my friend, that interfere with my admiration of it," replied Walter; "I am cold, I am hungry and I want to go to sleep."

Santoro checked off these wants upon his fingers, then exclaimed: "Canelli!"

The youngest brigand of the band answered to this name; he had, as afterwards appeared, joined it but a few days ago, and was employed for the present as their fag and errand boy. He was not sixteen, but as tall as the tallest of his companions, and his sharp olive face had a fierce hunted look.

"Food and a capote," said Santoro, and pointed to the forest from which they had just emerged. It seemed to Walter as though he might just as well have demanded a carriage-and-four, so far as any likelihood of his wishes being fulfilled was concerned; but without a word of question the lad darted like an arrow down the steep, and in a few minutes returned with a complete sheepskin, in the hood of which, as in a basket, were a huge hunch of brown bread and a piece of clotted cream (called raccolta). The bread was bitter and the cream sour, but Walter enjoyed both amazingly, rather to the disapproval, as it seemed to him, of his two attendants. The fact was, as he subsequently discovered, they argued from his relish of this sort of food, which even they were aware was far from choice, that he had not been accustomed to dainties, and was probably therefore by no means rich; and the conclusion they drew, as it turned out, was not without its advantage to him. As a general rule, it took thirty-six hours of life in the mountains (which means semi-starvation) to bring a rich prisoner down to raccolta. The capote was very grateful to Walter, to whose limbs the night breeze upon the hill top came piercingly cold.