

## TRUE TO HIS WORD.

## A NOVEL.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

## IN THE BOTANICAL GARDENS.

Walter believed in his friend Pelter implicitly. He was one, he knew, who not only never fell short of his promises, but was the last man to suggest a groundless hope. As to what device he had in his mind for hindering Mrs. Sheldon from making one of the yachting party to Italy, he would make no conjecture; but he was confident that the design was seriously entertained. He knew, too, that Jack was serious in requesting him to be silent upon the matter; but whether the self-sacrifice upon his friend's part was such as he had described it to be had grave doubts.

It was no small matter that would have induced Mr. Pelter to bow the knee to Baal, and present himself in an "all-rounder" hat and coat of formal cut at the Botanical Gardens on a Sunday. The hat, indeed, would be purchased for the occasion; but as to the coat—"Do you think any of these will do?" inquired he of Walter, exhibiting to him the contents of his scanty wardrobe, which, to say truth, were rather of an artistic than fashionable make.

"My dear Jack, you look like a gentleman in anything," said Walter assuringly. "You are very good to say so," replied his friend ruefully; "though it strikes me that you have paid me a compliment at the expense of my tailor."

But, nevertheless, Walter was right; it would have been impossible for any one of intelligence superior to that of a vestryman to have mistaken Mr. John Pelter for a snob.

Whatever he undertook to do he did thoroughly, and having in this case abjured one principle, he proceeded to abjure another by insisting on punctuality.

"We should be at this place before your friends," said he, "if my plan is to take effect."

"And may I now ask what that plan is?" "No, my lad, if you would be so good, neither now nor ever; let it suffice you to note the result of it."

Walter was much astonished, but, of course, said nothing, beyond promising to avoid the topic.

At half past two they accordingly presented themselves at the Gardens. The main body of fashionable folks had not yet arrived; but a few promenaders were walking up and down the lawn, and the front row of chairs was fast filling with those who had come both to see and to be seen.

The two young men took their seats under a tree, from which they could watch those who entered by the chief turnstile.

"I shall know Lady Selwyn from your picture, I conclude?" observed Pelter.

"Well, I flatter myself you will; and as for Mrs. Sheldon, you may recognize her."

"Hush!" cried Pelter; "there she is," and, indeed, at that moment the widow entered the grounds.

"Why, how did you know?" was the question upon Walter's lips; but it was arrested by a glance at his companion's face, which had on the instant altered in a very remarkable manner. His florid complexion had become quite pale; his lips, generally parted, with a slight smile, had closed together tightly; and the expression of his eyes had grown severe, almost to menace. "Let me have a few minutes' talk with this lady alone," said he quickly; and rising from his chair, he stepped down the long broad walk to meet her.

She was moving very leisurely, quietly scanning the row of faces, in search, no doubt, of Lady Selwyn; her attire was faultless, her air full of that careless grace which seems to ignore emotion of all kinds as vulgarity; when suddenly she dropped her veil, and turned as if to retrace her steps. She was not, however, permitted to do so alone; before she had got ten yards Pelter overtook her, and taking his hat off, as to an old acquaintance, at once addressed her, and then attached himself to her side. As to what he said Walter, of course, could make no guess; but whatever it was the widow appeared to listen to it with grave attention, though exhibiting neither alarm nor surprise. Nay, when the end of the lawn was reached, instead of returning up it, like other promenaders, this pair betook themselves to a side-walk, and could be seen through the leafy screen evidently engrossed in talk. That Jack was "thorough" in his views of friendship, and energetic enough when once roused to action, Walter was well aware; but that he should have thus sailed down upon a strange flag, and, as it were, piratically captured her, astounded him not a little. Was it possible, he had begun to think, that she was altogether a strange flag? when, under the

trellised gateway, there appeared two persons, whose advent turned his thoughts at once into quite another channel.

Lilian and Lotty had entered the gardens. The latter, of course, Walter had expected to see; but the former's coming had been wholly unlooked for, and it filled him with an eager joy, which for the moment no prudent reflections could dispel. He had scarcely dared to hope to have speech with her before her departure abroad, or perhaps even ever again; he had steadfastly resolved not to seek a meeting with her; she should have, he had resolved, no further sorrow because of him; he loved her, and she knew it; but in leaving England she should at least not have to break asunder an acknowledged tie. Such had been his resolute determination; but now, as she came slowly up the lawn with her beautiful face so pale and thoughtful, and her large eyes fixed sorrowfully upon the ground, his heart melted within him, and his resolutions with it. Her sister looked timorously from right to left, in search of her she had come to meet; but Lilian, it was plain, had no anxiety upon that account; her thoughts were deeper, and he dared to hope that they might be busy with him. Though they were to be parted, and forever, was it not right—or if it was wrong, was not the temptation irresistible, since the opportunity thus offered itself—to say to her a few simple words of farewell? He rose from his seat, and made his way towards them. Lady Selwyn was the first to see him; he saw her start and tremble, and knew that she was pressing her sister's hand, and whispering to her that he was near. Then Lilian looked up, crimson from brow to chin, but wearing such a happy smile, and held out her little hand.

"I am so glad to see you, Mr. Litton." If the light in her eyes was not love light, thought Walter, it was the very best imitation of it that female ingenuity had yet discovered. It seemed as if Lilian was conscious of this too; that a maidenly fear of having betrayed too much had seized her, for she added hastily: "We are both so glad, because we feel that we owe you reparation."

If Lady Selwyn was glad she did not look so glad as she looked frightened. "There are so many people here," whispered she timidly; "let us cross the broad walk to the other side."

Indeed, their present locality, exposed to the fire of a hundred pair of eyes and ears, was not one very suitable for explanations; whereas upon the other side there were no sitters, and but few walkers. So they crossed over.

"We have to apologize to you, Mr. Litton—all of us," continued Lilian with emphasis, "for the treatment you so unjustly received at Willowbank the other evening."

"I beg you will not do so," interrupted Walter; "any allusion to the matter must needs give you pain, and, therefore, give me pain; whereas, otherwise I feel no pain at all. It could not be helped, and I perfectly understand why it could not be so."

"It could be helped!" cried Lilian indignantly; "it was cowardly and shameful!"

"Now, Lilian, dear," broke in Lotty pleadingly, "why go into that, when Mr. Litton says he perfectly understands how we were all situated."

"He was turned out of our house," said Lilian, "as though it had been he who had played a treacherous and dishonest part; while others, who were really to be blamed, made profit by it."

"I entreat that you will say no more about it," said Walter earnestly. "What alone distresses me in the matter is the reflection that your father must needs have so poor an opinion of me; but that will all come right in time, and even if it does not, I have the satisfaction of feeling that I have been of some service to him, though he does not know it."

"And to others who do know it, but have not acknowledged it," added Lilian indignantly.

"For my part, Mr. Litton," said Lotty tearfully, "I do acknowledge it, believe me, with all my heart. I am sure you have behaved most generously, and—like a gentleman." Lilian laughed a bitter laugh, which, however, from its very bitterness, was sweet to Walter's ears. "Let us hope," continued her sister, "that a time will come when it will be safe to tell dear papa the whole circumstances of the case; and then, I am sure, he will do full justice to you. I am afraid he must not know that we have met you here; and if Mrs. Sheldon should see us, I am afraid—"

"We shall have quite enough of Mrs. Sheldon for the next six months," broke in Lilian haughtily; "and what that woman may choose to say of us—of me at least—is

a matter of the most supreme indifference to me. We were to meet here to receive her decision—about which she pretended to have some doubts—respecting her going abroad with us."

"She is here already, but she has a friend with her," added Walter quickly, as Lady Selwyn uttered a little cry of terror. "We can keep out of her way if you wish it; and if my company is really a source of alarm to you I will withdraw at once."

"Let us keep out of her way, by all means," ejaculated Lady Selwyn, "until you have done your talk."

"I shall not move an inch out of Mrs. Sheldon's way," observed Lilian decisively; and since she did not tell Walter to withdraw, he stayed.

"And when are you to start for Italy?" inquired he.

"We do not go to Italy at all, at least for the present, but to Sicily," answered Lilian. "Our first destination is Messina; but our plan is to coast round the island. I have proposed that, in hopes Mrs. Sheldon may prove to be a bad sailor, in which case we shall leave her on shore."

"O Lilian!" exclaimed Lotty reprovingly; "and you know that Reggie himself is never quite happy on board ship."

"We start on Saturday, I believe, from Plymouth," continued Lilian, without noticing this remonstrance.

"I trust the voyage may prove much pleasanter to you than you anticipate," said Walter mechanically, "and that your health may be restored by it."

"As to my health," sighed she, "I cannot say; but if it be true that the bitterest medicine is often the most beneficial, it certainly ought to do me good. The thought of it is hateful to me; nay, more, if there be such a thing as a presentiment, if misfortune is ever permitted to cast its shadow before it, then, indeed, will evil come of it." She shuddered, and drew her face shawl around her, as though its fragile folds could give her warmth.

"Now, is it not childish of dear Lilian to go on like that, Mr. Litton?" urged Lady Selwyn. "Assure you this is what I have to listen to every day."

"If I could only do anything to give you the least comfort," murmured Walter beneath his breath.

"Indeed, you have done more for me, for all of us, already than we deserve; while your acquittal has been—"

"Good heavens! there is Mrs. Sheldon," exclaimed Lotty. "She is looking down the row for us; I told her we should be there, you know. Had we not better go and join her?"

"As you please," answered Lilian coldly. Whether from fear of the widow, or from a kindly impulse which prompted her to leave the young people alone for a few seconds, Lady Selwyn here left her sister's side, and crossed over to where Mrs. Sheldon stood.

"I hope I may be allowed to see you when you return to England?" said Walter softly.

"O, yes—if I ever do return!" sighed Lilian.

"For heaven's sake, do not encourage such forebodings. For myself, I am no believer in them; but the knowledge that you entertain them is itself a real misfortune to me. You have no friend, Miss Lilian—none—who has a greater regard for you, a deeper devotion to your interests, than myself."

"You have proved it, Mr. Litton," answered she, in tones scarce above a whisper. "I would that it had been in my power to show my sense of your good."

"Here is Mrs. Sheldon, Lilian!" exclaimed Lotty. She pitched her voice in so high a key that it almost sounded like a warning, which perhaps the contiguity of the young couple had suggested to her; for the fact was, although they themselves were ignorant of it, that they were standing hand in hand.

"How are you, my dear Lilian?" inquired the widow pathetically. "It is quite an unexpected pleasure to see you here; and I hope I may draw good auguries from it."

"Thank you, I am pretty well," returned Lilian icily. "This is Mr. Litton. There is no occasion for ignoring your old acquaintance here, I suppose."

Mrs. Sheldon cast a sharp and piercing glance at Walter. The words "your old acquaintance" had a meaning for her which the speaker did not suspect; then, as if satisfied with her scrutiny, she smiled, and held out her hand. "Mr. Litton knows, I am sure, that nothing but a hard necessity compelled me to behave towards him as I did the other evening. His generous nature will forgive me for having sacrificed him for the good of others."

Walter bowed, but said nothing. "We have all to make our sacrifices in that way," she continued. "I am myself, for instance, compelled to forego the pleasure of accompanying these dear girls abroad."

"What! are you not going with us?" inquired Lady Selwyn. "That will be a great disappointment to Reginald, I am sure."

"And I hope not only to Reginald," an-

swered the widow, laughing. "These newly-married young ladies think only of their husbands, you see, Mr. Litton, which makes them seem sometimes almost rude."

"Indeed, I did not mean to be rude," answered Lotty, coloring very much. "Of course, we shall all be disappointed; and we had counted on your coming as almost certain."

"Well, I will tell you all about it when we get home. I think it due to your good father to let him know at once the change in my arrangements—not that I wish to hurry Mr. Litton away, I'm sure."

"I was just about to take my leave," said Walter, "at all events."

"Well, you and I are to be left in England, you know, and will, doubtless, meet again," smiled the widow as she shook hands with him. She had really carried matters off exceedingly well, considering the hostile company in which she found herself, and that Lilian had not expressed one syllable of regret at her change of plan.

"Good-bye, Lady Selwyn," said Walter kindly, and as he pressed her hand, the ready tears rose to her eyes. She knew, poor soul, that he knew how she had no longer any will nor way of her own, and that, though she had injured him, he forgave her. As she turned from him, she took Mrs. Sheldon's arm, and, though trembling at her own audacity, led her a few steps away.

"God bless you, Lilian!" murmured Walter.

"And God bless you!" was the whispered response; their hands met in one long pressure, and then they parted without another word.

Walter stood and watched till the three ladies reached the gate, when Lilian turned, as he knew she would, to give him a farewell look; and then, with a sigh, he moved away to seek his friend. But Mr. Pelter was no longer visible. He had doubtless taken himself home, to remove that badge of social servitude—his high crowned hat; and Walter followed, heavy at heart, but not without a keen curiosity with respect to the means which Jack had employed to alter the widow's plans. For that to Jack, strange as it might appear, Lilian was somehow or other indebted for her escape from that distasteful companionship, Walter had no doubt.

## CHAPTER XXV.

## HOW HE DID IT.

As Walter had expected, he found upon reaching Beech street that his friend had arrived before him. He found him walking up and down his studio with quick strides, without his pipe (which was itself a portent), and with his hands behind him, still gloved. Jack seldom wore gloves, but if compelled to do so, was wont to tear them off upon the first opportunity, as though they had been the tunic of Nessus.

"My dear Jack," said Walter, "is it really to the influence of your eloquence with Mrs. Sheldon that I am indebted for this great service? I heard her, with my own ears, tell Lilian that she had altered her plans, and would not accompany them to Sicily."

"To my influence—yes; to my eloquence—certainly not," returned Pelter gravely. "I used no honeyed words."

"Whatever words you used I am most grateful to you, as Lilian too would say did she know to whom she was indebted."

"It cost me something, lad," sighed Pelter, throwing himself into a chair—"something that smug sleek men declare they value beyond all else, and which is dear even to me, namely, self-respect."

"I hope not, Jack; not for my sake, nor—nor any one's."

"Ay, but it was so, for I had to lie to her, and, what is worse, to threaten her. Fancy using threats to a woman!"

"But why should she fear you or your threats either?"

"Well, that's too long a story to tell now. But don't you remember, Walter, how, at the beginning of this Willowbank business, and when we were speculating as to who had sent the offer for your Philippa, that I gave you a leaf of my life, that you might take a lesson from it—how, when I was young and honest and credulous like yourself, I was once fooled by a woman. You know what Pope says about the sex, and that I don't go with him; but in this case he was right. Intrigue was the atmosphere of that woman's life and men's hearts her playthings. But she had not the wit for the work, or she would never have lied except with her tongue; as it was, she did so in black and white, and amongst others to me. When we parted, when she flung me aside, like yonder glove"—and he cast one violently on the floor—"she asked me to give her back her letters; but that was impossible, because I had burned them every one before she asked me. Judging me by her own crafty, treacherous self, she did not believe me, and I took no pains to convince her; since she chose, after all that had passed between us, to think me capable of a base revenge, I let her do so; and to-day she suffered for it."

"Then you knew who this Mrs. Sheldon was from the moment I mentioned her?" observed Walter.

"I guessed it, lad. It was not the name I had known her under, but I heard that she had taken it; and, besides, I recognized your portrait of her. As for her face, I should have known it, had I not seen it for twenty years instead of ten, at the first glance. 'It can make no more mischief among men, so you have set it against your own sex, madam, have you?' That shaft went home, I promise you."

"What! you told her that?" exclaimed Walter excitedly.

"Ay, and she knew who was meant. At first she thought I was pleading my own cause, not yours; but I undeceived her there. I told her that it might have been so once; that years ago I might have loved some pure and simple girl, such as your Lilian, had my experience of womankind been happier in those days; but as it was, that I had had no cause to trust in woman, she tried to fool me even then; 'tis second nature with her, and first as well; but she might as well (as I told her) have fawned upon the turnstile. Then I made her understand not only that her past, but that her present was known to me, even to the fact that, with her nephew's aid, she was angling for the rich merchant."

"What! are you jealous, then, dear Jack?" sighed she.

"I declare it made me laugh aloud to hear her."

"No," said I; "I was not jealous, but resolute that her marriage with Mr. Christopher Brown should not take place—that I was acquainted with her plans, and meant, so far as he was concerned, to prevent them; not, indeed, for his sake, but for his daughter's; and, to begin with, that she was not to accompany the family to Italy."

All this had been told in a quiet cynical manner, very different from Pelter's usual tone; but when here, amazed, Walter inquired what right his friend had had to control Mrs. Sheldon's movements, he answered vehemently: "What right? Why, the right of the strongest. Is it for you to have scruples—you, who affect to love this girl and would have me preserve her—scruples against a serpent? She is harmless now; but, let me tell you, my snake-charming was not done by soft words."

"Indeed, my friend, you mistake me," cried Walter; "every one has a right to protect the weak against the wicked. I used the word as Mrs. Sheldon would have used it. Did she not resent, I should have asked, this interference with her arrangements?"

"Of course she resented it; she would have struck me dead, if looks could have done it. But she never questioned my right, nor even my motives."

"You would not have dared to speak to me like this," was all she said, "if you had burned those letters. It is not only women, then, who tell lies."

"Nothing that I know—or which I hold in my possession—shall be used to your disadvantage, madam," replied I respectfully, "if only you will be ruled by me in this particular matter. If otherwise, it will be my painful duty to place in Mr. Brown's hands a certain note—I think you will remember it."

"You coward!" she broke forth. "If I had really kept that letter, she would have spoken truth; and even as it was, lad, I felt like a whipped cur. Do you understand now that I have done something more for you to-day than put on a tall hat?"

"Indeed, indeed, I do, Jack," exclaimed Walter earnestly.

"Yes. But if our positions had been reversed, you feel that you could not have done as much yourself for me?" answered Pelter bitterly.

"I did not say that, Jack. Good heavens! do you suppose that I am reproaching you for sacrificing (as you said) your self-respect for my sake?"

"Well, this much I must needs say in my own justification: it was not altogether for your sake, Walter. It was for this young girl's sake also, whom I have never seen, except on canvas. If she is as good as she is beautiful, it was my bounden duty to defend her from that most unscrupulous of enemies, a jealous woman."

"Of course, I know Mrs. Sheldon is Lilian's enemy; but why should she be jealous of her?"

"Because Mrs. Sheldon failed where she has succeeded. Did she not fail, man, in winning your smiles down at Penaddon?" "She surely never told you that, Jack!" cried Walter.

"Certainly not; nor did you either; but yet I knew it. She must either fail or succeed with every man that comes her way. Well, this being so, I knew she would stick at nothing in the way of revenge; and, as it happens, interest and vengeance in this case went hand in hand together. She is as poor as a church mouse, as I conjectured, and is playing for a great prize in Mr. Christopher Brown; and could she have hooked the father, it would have gone hard with her step-daughter, you may take my word for it. Even as it is, the poor girl has, in my opinion, a very dangerous relative in her new-found brother-in-law; a Frankenstein, too, you should remember,