

## TRUE TO HIS WORD.

A NOVEL.

## CHAPTER XLIV.

## THE PROMISE KEPT.

"We must make good speed, signor," said Santoro, who was in waiting for Walter behind the wall. "That young fellow whom you have just parted from was the same who was watching us last evening at the cemetery. I am much mistaken if the troops are not sent out after us immediately, and it is possible that this time they may know where to find us."

He was referring to Corrali's camp, which, in that case, would have to shift its quarters, and the observation struck poor Walter as cool and selfish enough under the circumstances in which he was placed. He neither expected nor desired praise for the voluntary sacrifice of liberty and life that he was about to make, but that it should be thus altogether ignored filled him with disgust. They had passed on their way for some time in silence, and having crossed the main road, were about to ascend the lower slopes of the mountain, when Santoro thus addressed the companion who had once more become his prisoner: "I suppose, signor, you would never consent to become a brigand?"

"A brigand? Well, I have never considered the matter, Santoro, but I honestly tell you that I don't think it would suit me." "Ah, the damp and the cold no doubt are unpleasant, and especially when there is not food enough to make one indifferent to them! still it is better to shiver a little and even to want food and drink, than to die, signor."

"Doubtless, Santoro," answered Walter, unable to restrain a smile. "But there would be also other objections; and besides no one has offered me the alternative."

"Ah, but there is one who might do so; Look, signor, I have no desire to kill you, like some of those up yonder; on the contrary, I would have you live. You are brave or you would not have smiled just now—you are strong and active; you would make as good a brigand as the best of us. Why not marry the signora?"

"Marry the signora!" For the moment Walter did not understand to whom his companion was alluding.

"Yes, marry the Signora Joanna. She loves you, Signor Litton, for Lavocca told me as much. Only consider the matter. We could both—you and I—be married at the same time; then we should form a separate band, independent of that scoundrel Corbara, though we should be under orders as respects Corrali."

The childishness of this design was such as once more to try Walter's restraint, but he answered seriously: "My good friend, such a plan would be impossible under any circumstances."

"What! you would rather die than marry the signora?"

"I did not say that; but I would certainly rather die than accept such conditions of existence as those you have proposed to me."

Santoro looked at his prisoner with amazement. "Come on!" cried he with a gesture of impatience as he started up the hill side; nor did he utter another word.

Walter was well aware that the proposition that had been made to him could never have originated with his companion, but had been most likely suggested to him by Lavocca, who might certainly be supposed to know the inclinations of her mistress. On the other hand, he did not believe that the latter had authorized her to make it. Joanna had an intelligence much too acute to entertain such an idea with seriousness. That she was in love with him was certain, and in that love lay his only hope—if hope there yet might be. She had already shown her good will towards him; but in effecting what she had, had also shown the limits of her power. After a long climb in silence they came to an open space, from which there was a magnificent view.

"By Heaven, there they are!" exclaimed Santoro.

Walter's heart beat fast as he heard him; he thought that they had already come within sight of those who were about to kill him. But the brigand's eyes were fixed upon the place from which they had ascended on the main road, through which was passing a long column of troops, while in advance was a cloud of dust, with the sunlight glinting through it upon lance and helmet. It seemed to Walter as unreasonable that cavalry should be sent after them as though a ship of war had been despatched on such a service, and he said so.

"Their object is," explained Santoro, "to surround us altogether before proceeding to attack the camp, the position of which has been discovered. The Government is making a great effort for the English milord, but it will not be to his advantage.

If Corrali has caught sight of the soldiers it is ten to one that it will have gone hard with your friend already."

"But surely he will have kept his word with me as I with him; he gave us until eight o'clock to-night."

For the moment it struck Walter that if what Santoro said were true, and violence had been already offered to the unhappy merchant, he himself was under no obligation to keep his bargain. The thought had hardly crossed his brain, when two men with guns, who had been lying in ambush, interposed themselves between him and liberty. It was evident that he had unconsciously passed by them on the way. Of all faces that could meet his own at such a time those of these two men were the most unwelcome, for the new comers were Corbara and Canelli.

"Welcome, signor," said the former sardonically—"welcome, though I see you come empty-handed. It seems to me that you were repenting of having returned to us."

"Come, let us be fair," put in Santoro; "the signor had kept his word and we have no right to complain."

"No right to complain when he has let loose those soldiers upon us!" and the speaker pointed towards the troops. "They are pouring in from every point in the compass; and yet, if they poured from the sky itself, they would not save you, Mr. Englishman."

"No; they will not save him," echoed Canelli. "If they kill us we will have our revenge first, lieutenant; will we not?"

"There, hark to the villain!" continued Corbara. "He was not so fortunate in winning the signora's money from the rest of us as he expected to be and that has rather put him out. Has it not?"

"There are others less in luck than I am," answered the young brigand, looking at Walter menacingly. "They have not waited for eight o'clock with the old fellow up yonder, and why should we be more particular with this one?"

"Stand off!" cried Santoro, "and keep your hands to yourself. I am answerable to the captain for my prisoner here and you had better not interfere with him."

"Well, he will not give you much trouble after he gets up yonder," observed Corbara. With that they parted, the two brigands moving down the hill, while Walter and his companion pushed on so quickly that before sunset, and therefore considerably in advance of the time appointed for their return, they presented themselves at the brigand camp. At the sight of them a murmur of sullen satisfaction broke forth from its inmates; and Joanna herself came forward to meet them.

"I ought not to say I am glad to see you, Signor Litton," said she; "yet I can hardly be sorry that you have redeemed your word. I knew you would justify my confidence in it, though my brother scoffed at the idea, and has gone down yonder in the conviction that we should not see you."

"He was wrong, signora; I am come back as I promised to my death. All the favor I have to ask of him is to let it be a quick one."

"Do not speak of that just yet, Signor Litton," answered she; "the time is not yet arrived."

"I know it; and yet before that time some cruelty has been perpetrated upon my unhappy friend, contrary to Corrali's promise."

"I could not help it," replied Joanna; "the sight of the troops put my brother in a rage, and when he is here I am powerless."

"But when he is not here?"

"Well, I can then do something," said she. "I would wish then to speak with Mr. Brown at once."

Joanna looked disappointed; she had evidently anticipated some request upon his own account; but she acquiesced, and Walter moved on without hindrance to the spot which his fellow-captive usually occupied. He found the old merchant guarded by two men. As Walter drew nigh he lifted up his face and a sad smile lit up his features.

"What! Walter, my lad, have you come back?" he murmured.

"Yes, my friend, did I not promise to do so?"

"Ah, yes! but I thought nature would have been too strong for you. However, they will surely not treat you as they have treated me." A groan here escaped from the old man's heart that would have moved any heart save that of a brigand.

Walter had taken the precaution to bring with him a flask of brandy, and he now offered it to his companion, who put it greedily to his lips. The effect was instantaneous; the flame of life once more sprang up in its socket and the familiar thoughts that had been numbed within him were set free.

"How is Lillian, Walter?"

"She is weak, sir, but no longer suffering. She has been very ill, but I think she is on the road to health. She sent her dearest love, as Lady Selwyn did; but neither are as yet aware of our sad strait."

"That is well, since nothing can be done. How was it, Walter, that the payment of the ransom went amiss?"

In a few words he told him what had occurred.

The old merchant listened in silence. "I had thought," said he, when all was finished, "that there were no men in the world so wicked as these brigands, but it seems I was mistaken."

He reproached himself with his own blindness to the baronet's true character and contrasted it with that of Walter. At any other time such comparison would have been embarrassing, but the fact was Walter scarcely heard it; his own reflections were running in a far deeper groove.

The sun had set, and it was near the hour which had been appointed as the limit of Walter's return, when he was roused from his meditations by Santoro.

"Signor Litton," said the brigand, "the signora would speak to you."

"Do not leave me, Walter!" exclaimed the old merchant. "They are going to put us to death; but at least let us die together."

"Nothing will happen to either of you," said Santoro in answer to this appeal.

Walter answered nothing, for he was sick at heart; but arose and followed Santoro into Joanna's presence.

## CHAPTER XLV.

## LEAP YEAR.

It was already dusk as Walter and Santoro crossed the camp, and where the few trees grew the light was dim. Walter recognized the sister of the brigand chief as she received him standing near some beech trees.

"I have sent for you, Signor Litton," said she, "to say what it does not become a woman's lips to say. The peril in which you stand, the imminence of it and something in my own heart must plead as my excuse. I love you!"

The fact was not certainly unknown to Walter; but the confession of it astounded him. Having heard thus much, he did not doubt that the proposition hinted at by Santoro—that he should save his life by wedding Joanna—was about to be made to him.

"For your sake," said she, "I am content to give up my place among my people; to exchange this free air and untrammelled life for an existence that must needs seem cramped and submissive; my native land for yours, if only you will let me call you mine! My hand is yours if you will accept it. I cannot flatter myself that you would do so if you were free to choose, but since it holds your life in it, signor, my love may help to make it worth your taking."

Walter had no love to give her; but he had pity, which is said to be akin to it; while the natural desire for life at any price was pulling at his heart. If he should promise to wed Joanna, he would hardly be forsaken, since to the girl he would have wed he was already dead; marriage with Lillian was an impossibility; then why not save his life by marriage with Joanna? These thoughts flashed upon Walter's brain in spite of himself, though death was hovering over him and love was demanding a final answer to its appeal. But there was a feature in this case which made it easy for him to come to a just decision. How was it possible for him to return to Palermo a free man with such news as he would have to bring with him? Could he tell Lillian that he had saved his life on the condition of marrying Joanna, but had left her father to perish at the hands of men made still more furious by his own escape? Would not the twofold woe be her death doom, and the life he had thus purchased for himself become intolerable as that of Sir Reginald himself? He had no doubt of it, and therefore no hesitation as to what it became him to reply.

"Joanna," said he, "I am deeply sensible of the love which you offer me at so great a sacrifice to yourself, and thank you for it with all my heart; but the last words spoken by yonder unhappy man, 'Do not leave me, Walter,' and which are still ringing in my ears have greater force than even those which promise me life and liberty. I cannot accept these gifts, for they would be worthless to me, since they would have been purchased by the desertion of my friend."

"Walter," she said, "for your sake I will save your friend. It will be difficult and very dangerous, but I will do my best to do it. I had promised to desert my brother, though you will not desert this man, who is not even of your blood. For your sake and to win you for my own, I will become a traitress. This very night—nay, within this very hour, for we have no time to lose—I will place you both in safety, if you will pass your word to be my husband. Hark!"

Through the stillness was heard the firing of musket shots at a great distance. "Yonder Corrali speaks. He will be up here shortly. No power of mine will then avail to save you. Quick, quick! give me your word."

The circumstances in which Walter was now placed had become strangely altered. If Joanna could carry out her present offer, Lillian would lose indeed her lover, but she would at least have left to her her father. It would be no longer for his own sake but for hers that he would become another's. His hand he could not offer her, but in its place he would give her her father's life.

Again was heard a firing of musketry, but the sound was more distinct. The combatants were evidently coming nearer.

"Walter, your hand?" said Joanna; "in a few minutes more it may be too late."

"I give it you, Joanna. If you will save the old man's life I promise to make you my wife."

Never surely was betrothal made under circumstances so ill-assorted and inapt; nor was there one moment to spare for its ratification.

"Santoro, Colletta," cried Joanna, "let both the prisoners be fast secured."

This was done at once, and Walter and Mr. Brown were placed side by side. The brigands crowded round them with wrathful looks, which the noise of the firing had doubtless evoked; they imagined that vengeance was already to be taken upon their wretched captives.

"Corrali is beset down yonder," exclaimed Joanna, "and we must send him succour. Now these men are bound, Lavocca and myself are to be left to guard them. Let each take his musket and do his part; and when it is done you will find us here in charge."

There was an instant of hesitation; then the men moved to where the arms were piled and each one took his weapon. Santoro alone remained standing beside the prisoners.

"Go, Santoro; it is you who will be in command till you join my brother," said Joanna.

"No, signora; I remain here at all hazards," answered he.

"You disobey then my express orders?"

"For the present, signora, yes. I venture to think the captain would wish the prisoners to be left with a stronger guard than yourself and Lavocca."

"If you remain you will do so at your peril!"

"That I quite understand, signora. Corrali will decide when he comes up the hill again as to which of us was in the right."

By this time the band were ready to march, and in their presence all controversy was to one of the disputants out of the question.

Santoro watched them disappear; then with a smile said to Joanna: "It was well schemed, signora; but I am not quite such a fool as Lavocca has doubtless represented me to be."

"Lavocca has always spoken well of you in that respect. It is her wish as well as my own that we should be left alone here." "Ay; to let those birds yonder out of the cage. You would find your own account in such a plan, signora; but what advantage would it be to Lavocca, who would only share the guilt and the punishment?"

"It is love then and not duty that keeps you here, Santoro?"

"It is both, signora," answered the brigand smiling. "It is duty to Corrali and love for Lavocca."

"Then what I have now to ask of you, Santoro, will be hard to grant," continued Joanna. "It is my intention to set loose these captives and lead them to Palermo. You may oppose it, but it will be at the loss of one of our two lives; and if you should kill me you will not find it easy to win Lavocca."

"I would not marry him if he did, though there was not another man in the world," interposed Lavocca.

"But, on the other hand," continued Joanna, "if you will come into our plans and assist us to escape, Lavocca will marry you as soon as we set foot in the city. A free pardon will easily be obtained for us in consideration of this service to the Englishmen."

"Your brother would flay us alive before the week was out," said Santoro.

"If he caught us; I don't doubt that in the least," answered Joanna. "But milord yonder will place you on board his yacht and you will never leave it until you and your wife are landed in England, where he will provide for you handsomely. Of course there will be danger in getting down the mountain."

Joanna felt justified in taking his silence for consent, and she ran across the camp and cut the ropes that bound the prisoners, at the same time whispering a few words to Walter.

"Is it then come at last?" cried the old merchant; "is death awaiting us?"

"No; life and freedom if you have only the courage to take advantage of them," replied Walter. In the excitement of the moment he had almost forgotten the price he had agreed to pay.

"Santoro yonder is on our side, and will lead us down the mountain," said Joanna.

Walter answered with a silent pressure of his hand.

## CHAPTER XLVI.

## THE ESCAPE.

In a few minutes the whole party had left the camp. They had descended about two-thirds of the mountain, and had reached what was the most dangerous part of the journey, namely, the locality where the brigands' line intervened between them and the troops, when suddenly 'the call' was heard in front of them. Walter and Mr. Brown at once stepped back; but the three others moved boldly on, Santoro, with admirable presence of mind, at the same time giving back the answering note. The next moment they were confronted by Corbara. Of all the band, next to Corrali himself, this man was the most to be dreaded, and he was especially hostile to Santoro. He was probably unaware of the succour sent by Joanna, and would therefore not be so suspicious of her presence as if he had known she had been left in charge of the prisoners.

"Ha! Santoro, how comes it that you are down here? Here he stepped back with a movement of suspicion. 'What has caused you to leave the camp?'"

"We are come to help my brother," answered Joanna; "the firing came so quick that I felt he must be hardly pressed."

"He is not fighting," answered Corbara; "it seems to me that we have lost enough by it for the present."

This was a reference, as Joanna well understood, to the captives, and in her ignorance as to whether they were not even at that moment within sight of the speaker, she felt that she was being tried to the uttermost.

"I hope there has been no loss amongst us?" inquired she.

"As to loss of life I don't you; but I for one have lost blood enough."

"Well, here is she who will bind up your wound, Corbara," and Joanna signed to Lavocca.

"It is but a scratch on the right arm," said Corbara. "What's that?" A cry broke from the covert from which they had just emerged, and almost at the same moment Corbara fell forward; a blow from Santoro laid him on the ground.

"Hark, hark!" cried Joanna; "there is mischief behind us; see to Signor Litton." Colletta was felled by Walter, though not before he had uttered a cry for help, which was already answered to left and right of them; they could even hear the noise of men forcing their way towards them.

"Quick, quick!" cried Santoro; "down the hill every one of you." And all five ran forward. Again and again a sheet of flame flashed out upon them, and one at least of their number fell. It was not Mr. Brown, Walter knew, for he was holding the old man firmly by the arm and helping him on; and it was not Joanna, for she never left them, and at each flash seemed as though she would have interposed herself between them and death. Thus they held on their headlong way for a considerable time, when the old merchant suddenly fell exhausted on the ground. Then for the first time they missed Santoro. The noise of the firing had ceased; there were no signs of their pursuers.

"Where is he?" cried Lavocca. "He was close behind me all the way, and again and again bade me be of good courage. If he has fallen into their hands I will avenge him yet."

"He is not in their hands, Lavocca, whispered Joanna; "I saw him killed by a bullet."

"You saw him die, and yet you ran on? Oh, cruel, cruel!" cried the girl.

"What aid could we have given him, dear Lavocca? Would you have had us make the triumph of his murderers still greater by becoming their prisoners? His dearest wish, if he could now express it, would be that you should effect your escape. Let us now think only of obeying him."

Accustomed to submit to Joanna's will, Lavocca was herself again before they resumed their flight. It was a harsh blow that had deprived her of the being who was so soon to have been her husband. Joanna was as much grieved as she at their late companion's death, for she could not but be aware that she herself had been the involuntary cause of it.—But now that the pursuit of those whom she had good cause to fear was over or seemed to be so, and while the reward for which she had fought so hard seemed within her grasp her heart had scarce room for grief. "See, Walter," said she as they stood upon a low spur of the mountain; "yonder is Palermo; the troops are not far from hence; but in any case, in one hour more you will be free, and I shall be bound only by the sweet ties of love and duty."

The words had scarce escaped her lips, when a line of fire broke out from a small thicket close to the right of them and she fell down at his feet. When the blinding smoke had rolled away Walter found himself surrounded by a crowd of soldiers, astonished to see the young Englishman moved to tears by the just retribution that had overtaken the sister of the brigand chief. Lavocca was taken prisoner; and Mr. Christopher Brown was drinking brandy from a flask which the officer in command was holding to his lips.

(To be Continued.)