

TRUE TO HIS WORD.

A NOVEL.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.—Continued.

'It seems to me that the signora has fallen in love with our young Englishman,' laughed Corbara.

Joanna's cheek lost all its paleness for an instant as the words met her ear; but she answered nothing, only looked with passionate appeal towards her brother.

'Indeed, Joanna,' answered he, 'such a proposal as yours seems to me to excuse a man's saying almost anything. These Englishmen are the common property of us all, and though it is true the signora was given to yourself, yet she was set free with a view to benefit you. You would have had a fair share of the ransom had it been obtained, but it has not been obtained, and it is no fault of ours that the retaliation we intend to take for its non-arrival will not afford you gratification.'

'Gratification!' echoed she. 'When these men are dead—to-morrow or the next day—will the recollection of your cruelties be worth to you three hundred thousand ducats? That the money has not arrived is not their fault, but yours. If you had sent some responsible person to manage the affair instead of a dying woman you would have all been rich men by this time. Why for all you know, she may never have reached the city alive, much more in a condition to settle matters with the bankers. Ask Santoro there, who helped to take her down to the village, whether she looked more dead or alive.'

'The signora was very weak and ill, no doubt,' said Santoro. 'It was my belief that she would not get over the journey.'

'And yet you intrusted this important affair to such an envoy,' continued Joanna. 'One would think that three hundred thousand ducats was a sum as easily extracted as the ransom of a village mayor.'

'It is doubtless a large sum,' observed Corrali; 'and since it has not been paid the forfeit will be made proportionate.'

'Yes; but it would have been paid had you gone the right way about it; and if you are not all mad or thirsting for blood you may have it yet.'

'What you say is doubtless very true, Joanna,' replied Corrali; 'but unless you have something else to propose to us than to have patience—'

'I have something else to propose,' interrupted she; 'I suggest that the error which you committed in sending a dying woman to negotiate so important an affair shall be repaired. Let another envoy be chosen, who will not let the grass grow under his feet. This young Englishman understands milord's affairs, being his friend.'

'It seems to me, captain, that there really is something in this,' observed Santoro. 'Something, yes,' laughed Corbara; 'and it is easy enough to see what it is, so far as the signora is concerned.'

'If we send him on this embassy,' said Corrali, 'what guarantee should we have that we shall ever see him again? If he gets to Palermo he will pay us neither in purse nor person.'

'That is clear as the sunshine,' observed Corbara; 'there will be but one prisoner left to us out of three and not a single ducat.'

'That is so,' murmured a dozen voices. Even Santoro was obliged to acknowledge the correctness of this arithmetic.

'You shall not lose the ducats,' answered Joanna. 'In case the young man does not return on the appointed day I will pay his ransom out of my own purse.'

'You must be mad, Joanna,' cried Corrali.

'On the contrary, it is you that are mad, Rocco, who will risk nothing when there is a prospect of gaining so much. I see plainly that by this plan we shall gain all we have looked for, and I am not blinded by passion like some of you.'

'By Heaven, I am not sure of that!' muttered Corrali.

'At all events, my friends, you will have the three thousand ducats to do what you please with,' said Joanna; 'and if one of you should win it all at baccara he will have a fortune.'

'I like that idea, I confess,' observed Colleta, who had great luck at cards.

'In order that there may be no doubt about the matter, my friends,' said Joanna, 'you shall have the three thousand ducats at once. Santoro knows where they are kept, and shall go with any one of you to fetch them this very moment.'

Walter had listened to these proceedings with intense interest, but even when the moment had apparently arrived for his being put to cruel tortures, he had scarcely been more moved than when he heard the generous proposal of his late hostess. While it was in debate he had uttered not a syllable, lest he should do it prejudice; but now that matters had declared themselves in his favor he addressed the brigand chief as follows: 'I am fully aware, Captain

Corrali, of the great kindness which your sister has shown me and of the generosity of the offer she has made; it is impossible for me to over-rate the confidence she has reposed in me; but you may be certain of this, that it is not misplaced. If I am alive I shall return to you at any reasonable date you may please to fix, either with my ransom or without it.'

'And with your friend the milord's ransom,' put in the captain quickly. 'It is on that account that we give you permission to depart.'

Joanna was about to speak, but Corrali stopped her angrily: 'You have got your way, woman, and be content with it. The arrangement of the rest of the affair remains in my hands. To-day is Tuesday. You will understand then at this hour, at eight o'clock in the morning you will present yourself on this very spot on Friday.'

'The time is very short,' pleaded Walter, 'since there may be much to be done.'

'Then we will say eight o'clock in the evening, which will give you twelve hours more. At eight o'clock next Friday evening then we shall know whether an Englishman can be trusted to keep his word or not. If the word of an Englishman should fail, that of a Sicilian will not; I mean it.'

'O Walter, Walter, you are not going to leave me!' cried the old merchant, perceiving that his friend was about to depart.

'I shall come back again, Mr. Brown; I shall indeed.'

'No, no; you will never do that!' exclaimed the other.

'I will, sir. So Heaven help me! as I am a Christian man and a gentleman, I will return, either to set you free or to die with you. There is some hitch about the ransom, and I am going to Palermo to expedite matters. Don't fret, sir; all will be well yet, thanks to this generous lady.'

'But what has made the woman so civil to us?' inquired the merchant.

'She has a kind heart; it was she who sent the bread and mutton when you were half starved the other day.'

'But she carries—'

'Hush! yes; never mind. I must go now, for every minute is precious. Is it possible that anything should be added to the authorization you sent by Lillian?'

'Nothing; it was quite in form. Still I will write one line if these wretches will give me pen and paper.'

Corrali produced the necessary implements and the merchant wrote: 'Spare no expense and trust implicitly the bearer; (signed) CHRISTOPHER BROWN.' 'Give my dear love to Lillian, and should I never see her again nor you—'

'You will see me again this day week,' interrupted Walter; he thought it base to take advantage of such an opportunity, though it was evident that the merchant had been about to couple his name with Lillian's. 'Good bye, sir, for the present and be of good courage.'

'Farewell, Walter, farewell; and God be with you!' answered the old man.

'Amen!' replied Walter solemnly.

Then the members of the band, with the exception of Corbara, who stood apart, flocked round him to bid him good bye; the same hands which had been ready to inflict death upon him an hour ago, being now held forth to him with good will. Corrali alone was grave.

'You will not misunderstand your countryman's position here because of all this,' said he, alluding to these manifestations of friendship.

'Neither his nor my own,' answered Walter. 'I know there is no mercy to be expected for either of us in case the ransom is not forthcoming.'

'And yet you will keep your word?'

'And yet I shall keep my word.'

The captain smiled incredulously as he held out his hand. 'Santoro here will be your guide to Palermo—and back again, if you ever do come back.'

Then Walter looked about him for Joanna, for whom he had reserved some heartfelt expressions of gratitude; but both she and Levocca had disappeared. He was distressed at this, yet at the same time was conscious of a sense of intense relief. He felt that Corbara had been right in imputing to the chief's sister a personal affection for himself, which it was impossible he could reciprocate.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

SIR REGINALD TAKES HIS OWN VIEW.

As Walter descended the mountain, accompanied by Santoro, his reflections did not permit him to pay much attention to the incidents of the way; when, now and then, his companion bade him listen, in fear that they were approaching the troops, who would certainly have shot them both without waiting for an explanation, he stopped and listened; but for the most part his own thoughts preoccupied him, and he only knew

that the direction in which he was advancing so rapidly was towards Palermo. The sense of sudden freedom did not occur to him with the force it had done when standing in front of the cavern, for he was even less free now than he had been then; but the question whether he should have his freedom eventually agitated his mind perpetually.

'Stop, signor; there go the soldiers,' said Santoro; and on the road which had last come into view before them could be seen through the trees a considerable body of troops moving towards the city.

'The cordon must be loosening,' observed Santoro, 'unless these men have been relieved. Now is the time to get money up to the camp if we could only know where it was.'

This was clear enough; and Walter was for pushing on at increased speed; but Santoro bade him pause lest there should be more soldiers returning home and they should find themselves between two detachments. The wisdom of this advice was made evident within the next quarter of an hour by the appearance of another body of men almost as large as that which had preceded it.

'The troops have been recalled,' murmured Santoro triumphantly. 'The governor has grown tired of hunting us with the troops and the road for the ransom is now clear.'

'Let us hope so,' answered Walter fervently; 'but is it not possible that they have intercepted it?'

It was not unusual in similar cases for the Government to direct its division among the troops, for though it made feeble efforts to put down the brigands, it was high-handed enough in its measures respecting the illegal payment of the ransoms of their victims.

'No, no; the soldiers would have talked and sung as they went by had they had any success. Take my word for it, they have given up the whole thing and have gone home in disgust.'

At all events Walter and his companion met with no further hindrance and reached Palermo before dusk. Santoro, it was agreed, should not enter the city in his company; and the gate of the English burial ground having been fixed upon as a place of rendezvous every evening in case they should wish to communicate with one another, for the present they parted.

In the first place, it was absolutely necessary for Walter that he should seek his own lodgings on the Marina. Unshaven and scorched with the sun, he looked more like a native beggar than the young English gentleman who had embarked in pursuit of the Sylphide some fifteen days ago. Baccari, who was standing at his house door, did not even move aside as he approached, but regarded him with no very favorable expression.

'I have nothing for you,' said he, anticipating from this able-bodied but dilapidated stranger an application for alms.

'What! Baccari, has a fortnight's stay with Captain Corrali then so altered your old lodger?'

In a moment the honest little fellow had thrown himself about Walter's neck.

'Thanks be to Heaven and all the saints,' cried he, 'that you have returned alive! Come in, come in! What a spectacle do I behold! Nothing has happened like it since my neighbor Loffredo's case. O the villains, the scoundrels! Welcome home! A bath? Of course you desire a bath. I recognize you for an Englishman by that request, though otherwise you might be a countryman of my own and not one of the most respectable.'

Walter explained that he had come to effect the payment of his ransom.

'Ah, the ransom! Well yesterday I should have said you would have had but a bad chance, even supposing that you have the means of raising the money. But to day the soldiers have been recalled, since Corrali and his men have taken their departure towards Messina.'

'But the young lady—Mr. Brown's daughter—you tell me nothing of her.'

'Well, my dear young sir, there is but little to tell; no one has seen her since she was brought home to the hotel yonder, more dead than alive, except her sister and Julia.'

'Who is Julia?'

'Oh! that is the waiting maid whose services have been secured for her.'

'For Heaven's sake, tell me about the young lady? Is she worse or better? Is she in danger?'

'I don't know about danger, but she is still very ill, and unfortunately wandering in her mind. The sun was too much for her during that noontide journey, and she was ill before. My good sir, where are you going? It is out of the question that she should be able to see you.'

'Then I must see Sir Reginald,' said Walter; 'it is upon a matter that does not admit of a moment's delay.'

'Well, if it is about milord's freedom and the ransom,' observed Baccari, 'you may consider that as a public topic. Every one is talking about it; some say one thing and some another, but I can tell you this much—'

that Sir Reginald and the rest of them have been going the wrong way to work to procure your countryman's freedom; and not only the wrong way, but the very way to prevent it. Let the gold be put in a box and carried out at night up to Corrali's camp; then milord will come down in the morning. Whereas to send troops after these gentry is the way to make them flit from hillside to hillside, take their prisoner with them until one day they get tired and kill him.'

'That is precisely my own view of the matter,' answered Walter, and he took up his hat and turned his steps to the hotel, which was but a few paces off. On arriving at the hotel, notwithstanding that such a proceeding might of itself enrage Sir Reginald against him, he asked to see Miss Lillian Brown. The porter, however, accustomed to continual inquiries upon the part of the British residents after her health, misunderstood his words and replied that the young lady's condition was slightly improving, but that she had not yet recovered her senses. This was as bad as anything Walter could have expected, and of course put a stop to any idea of an interview.

'I wish to see her brother-in-law, Sir Reginald Selwyn,' observed he, 'upon business of great importance.'

'Very good, sir. This way if you please.'

'It is unnecessary to give my name,' said he; 'you may say an old acquaintance from England.'

It was nearly a quarter of an hour before Sir Reginald made his appearance, expecting doubtless to see some casual London acquaintance, who, finding him at Palermo, had dropped in for an evening call.

His countenance changed directly he set eyes on Walter; he did not seem so much surprised as annoyed and disappointed; his look of conventional welcome at once gave place to one of dislike and suspicion.

'This is an unexpected pleasure, Mr. Litton,' said he, pointing to a chair.

'You knew I was in Palermo, Sir Reginald, or at least that I had been so?'

The baronet hesitated: 'Yes; I have heard so.'

'And also that I had been taken prisoner by the brigands in company with your father-in-law, who is still unhappily in their hands?'

'I did not hear that you were in his company when taken prisoner; I had reason to suppose that such would hardly have been the case.'

'I was made captive, Sir Reginald, not in Mr. Brown's company, but in the attempt to give the alarm while there was yet time; I hoped to effect his release by force of arms. That time is unfortunately past; and it is my duty to inform you that if immediate steps are not taken to pay his ransom his life will be forfeited.'

'That is what Captain Corrali says, I suppose,' observed Sir Reginald.

'He has said so, and he will without doubt keep his word. If within four days the whole three hundred thousand ducats are not in his hands—'

'Why, that is fifty thousand pounds!' interrupted Sir Reginald; 'a modest sum to be asked for by a highwayman.'

'But is it possible that I am telling you this for the first time?' exclaimed Walter.

'Did not Miss Lillian tell you with what mission she was charged?'

'My sister-in-law was brought to the city in a dangerous condition, quite unfit to attend to any matters of business.'

'Business! But this is an affair that concerns her father's life. Do you mean to tell me that she never gave you the authorization for the payment of the money, which I saw Mr. Brown write out with his own hand?'

'I have seen no such document,' answered the baronet. 'As to the enormous sum you have mentioned, it is true that she has spoken of it more than once. She has been wandering in her mind ever since her return.'

'The sum is perfectly correct, Sir Reginald, and not a ducat less will be taken by the brigand chief. It is the price of Mr. Brown's life, and of my life also (though I do not wish to speak of that), since I have promised to return either with or without it within four days.'

'Excuse me, Mr. Litton,' said Sir Reginald, 'if I recommend that you should take some rest and refreshment before you speak any more on the topic. It evidently excites you, and if you have just escaped from these scoundrels' hands you are hardly fit to judge of them dispassionately.'

'Sir Reginald, I am as cool and collected as yourself; I have told you nothing which is not true. Your father-in-law will be put to death if you turn a deaf ear to what I say.'

'I scarcely think you are quite aware of what you say, Mr. Litton,' answered the other; 'you just expressed your resolve to return in person to these gentry in order that you may be put to death. In that case you are mad.'

'I know that many people think it madness to keep their word when it happens to be to their disadvantage,' answered Walter; 'but that is beside the question. I am pleading for your father-in-law, not for my-

self. And I must insist, in his name and for his life's sake, that an immediate search be made for the authorization of which I have spoken.'

'The word "insist" is one which is utterly out of place in this discussion,' observed he; 'but I make allowance for your excited condition, which the circumstances of the case may well excuse. Moreover I should be loath to refuse you satisfaction in so simple a matter.' Here he rang the bell and bade the servant request the presence of Lady Selwyn. 'My wife,' said he, 'who is in constant attendance on her sister, shall at once make search for the paper of which you speak. I conclude you will trust to her report if not to mine.'

'Trust, Sir Reginald!' echoed Walter. 'Do you suppose then that I think you capable of having ignored this authorization or of concealing it? Why, if you knew of it and yet kept it back, you would be a murderer—ay, just as much the assassin of your wife's father!'

'Here is my wife,' interrupted Sir Reginald. 'Pray, keep this extravagant talk of yours, Mr. Litton, somewhat within bounds, or at least reserve it for male ears. She had evidently heard his words and was looking at her husband with inquiring yet frightened eyes. 'A murderer!' she murmured—'an assassin!'

'Yes; those were the words this gentleman used, and which he applied to me, madam,' said the baronet. 'Does it appear to you that I look like one or the other?'

'But what does he mean, Reginald?'

'That is more than I can tell you. He has been raving here these twenty minutes about his friends the brigands, who have sent him for a trifle of fifty thousand pounds as the price of your father's release.'

'As the price of his life, Lady Selwyn,' answered Walter. 'He wrote out an order on the bankers for that sum and sent it by your sister; but Sir Reginald tells me it has not been found. I adjure you, if your father's existence is dear to you, to discover what has become of it.'

'Indeed, Mr. Litton, I will do my best,' said Lotty with a glance at her husband. 'My sister is very ill.'

'He knows all that,' interrupted Sir Reginald. 'She is much too ill to be interrogated on any such matter. But if the authorization was confided to Lillian it must be still in her possession. I don't say that I would act upon it, even if it was found, sir,' added he, as his wife left the room 'my idea is that one should never treat with these scoundrels save sword in hand; that we should give them lead and steel—not gold.'

'Nay, Sir Reginald; I am sure if you were to read your father-in-law's words, written as they were in the dire expectation of death, these scruples would weigh as nothing.'

'Well, we shall see. I need not trouble you to wait; but in case of Lady Selwyn's finding this document I will send word of the fact to your address if you will furnish me with it.'

Sir Reginald took out his tablets and wrote down the number of Mr. Baccari's house.

'And if the document is not found, Sir Reginald?'

'Well, in that case I cannot see what is to be done. The troops were promptly sent out and in considerable force.'

'They would have been useless in any case,' said Walter; 'but as it happens they have been withdrawn.'

'I had not heard of that,' returned the other.

'It matters not. I repeat that all armed intervention would be useless.'

'You must really allow others as well as yourself, Mr. Litton, to exercise some judgment in this affair. The British consul, the governor of the town and the humble individual who has the honor to address you are all of one opinion, and it is diametrically opposed to your own. As to the other matter you shall be communicated with if the necessity arises. Good morning to you.'

Walter rose and left the room without a word. He could not trust himself to speak more with this man, who treated the capture and death of a fellow-creature—not to mention that he was a near connection of his own—with such philosophic indifference. He could not imagine that he had failed to convince Sir Reginald of the peril of his father-in-law's position. On the contrary, a suspicion had taken possession of him that the baronet was well aware of it and had his own reasons for affecting to ignore it.

(To be Continued.)

He Didn't Get It.

Hardup (in need of a loan)—You must enjoy your great wealth, Pursell. With an income of a thousand a day the bills of the plumber, and butcher, and iceman have no terrors for you, while I—

Pursell—Yes, yes, Hardup, but you see you are not in daily terror of the chronic beggar nor compelled to refuse a hundred men a day the loans they beg for; so you see we are quits.