

TRUE TO HIS WORD.

A NOVEL.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FIXING THE PRICE.

On hearing the answering cry from their comrades, the party pushed up the hill, and presently came upon a level lawn, surrounded with fine trees, each a leafy tent, since their branches descended to the ground, so as to form shelter from rain or sun; a brook babbled down its centre, and by its side were tethered sheep and goats. Nor did this pastoral scene lack more romantic elements, for, beside the sheep, instead of shepherds, lay, wooing the morning sun, the main body of the brigand band, some thirty men, scarcely any of whom had yet reached middle life, and bedizened in such finery as only savages could elsewhere have found a pleasure in wearing. The pistols stuck in their gay scarfs, and the muskets piled in the centre of the lawn suggested a company of amateur actors rehearsing some exquisite tableautin, after Salvator Rosa, rather than what they really were—a band of ruffians. They jumped up with a shout of welcome as the new comers made their appearance, and crowded around Walter with signs of excitement and a chatter, of which he could make nothing, but which was probably concerning his market value in ducats. Then some one cried out "Il Capitano," and these gentry melted away from him as if by magic, and Corrali himself stood before him with outstretched hand.

"Welcome, signor, to our country house," said he. "I cannot say that I hope to see you long here; but while you are with us you shall have no cause to complain of our hospitality."

Walter made shift to make some civil response to this greeting—the courtesy of which he set down at its just value. It was evident that the brigand chief required something of him beside his ransom.

"Your friends in Palermo?"

"I have no friends there," interrupted Walter.

"Well, those then who miscall themselves your friends have been very injudicious; but for their having sent out the troops, milord and his daughter might by this time have been on board their yacht again. As it is, there is no knowing when that may be, if ever." And at these last words, which were uttered very sternly, a change came over the brigand's face, which seemed to reveal the character of the man.

"Where is milord, as you persist so wrongfully in calling him?"

"You shall see him in a few moments. I have sent for you here for that purpose. What you have told me of yourself and your slender purse may be true or not." Walter was about to speak, but the other stopped him with a gesture. "It is my rule that cannot be the same as will not; and when the ransom is not forthcoming I kill the captive. Your life is therefore forfeit. I might say much more than your life, but I do not wish to proceed to extremities with you, even in the way of menace. You may save your life without the loss of a ducat if you will only be guided by good sense."

Walter bowed. "What is it you require of me, Captain Corrali?"

"I want you to teach reason to this fellow-countryman of yours, whom I have in my power."

"And his daughter, where is his daughter?"

"She is safe. No harm will happen to her from us."

"That means that she is dying," answered Walter. "If the damp and cold should kill her, you are none the less her murderer."

"I will settle with my own conscience for that, signor," returned the other. "What we are both concerned about at present—and you much more than I—is this ransom. The old man is a fool, and can be made to understand nothing. He does not comprehend that I shall burn him alive; he thinks he is in London and has to deal with a mere pickpocket. I protest that he offered me one thousand ducats—not a week's living for the band. It made my fingers itch to shoot him down."

"What is it exactly you wish me to do?" inquired Walter.

"To convince him that I mean what I say, that what I threaten I will perform; and that if this money I demand is not forthcoming that he shall die."

"And what am I to gain if I am successful in persuading him, Captain Corrali?"

"Life, liberty! His ransom shall cover yours. If you fail, beware, young man, for you shall share his fate. Now follow me." With these words Corrali turned and led the way to a large beech tree, the branches of which swept the ground, and moving

them aside, revealed to Walter's eyes the recumbent form of Mr. Christopher Brown, wrapped in a capote and pillowed on one of the cushions stolen from the cabin of his yacht.

The old merchant had not been sleeping; anxiety and discomfort had banished slumber from him; but as he rose to regard his visitors he rubbed his eyes, like some newly awakened man, who doubts whether he is not still in the land of dreams.

"Why, that's not Mr. Litton, surely?"

The danger and strangeness of his position forbade his entertaining the ideas which might naturally have occurred to him under ordinary circumstances; he did not recognize in Walter the man whom he had dismissed from his own house for deceit, whom he suspected of plotting to win his daughter, and whose presence in Sicily at the present moment he might well associate with the pursuit of the same forbidden object; he only beheld a friend and fellow-countryman, and, as he vaguely hoped, with power to succour him.

"Why, who would have thought of meeting you in this den of thieves?" continued Mr. Brown. "Do you bring any good news?"

"Indeed, sir, no," answered Walter sorrowfully; "I am only this man's prisoner, like yourself."

"Yes, all mice in my trap," put in Corrali, understanding by Walter's manner what was meant. "Two were caught first, click! click! and then this one came to look after them, click!"

"What does the wretch say?" inquired Mr. Brown.

"He is telling you how it happens that I am here. I had discovered you were captured, and on my road to give the alarm I got taken prisoner myself."

"I am sorry that we have done you such a wrong," said the merchant.

"I shall not regret it, Mr. Brown, if only I may be the means of being of advantage to you," answered Walter. "At present our position is very serious. The troops have been called out, which has enraged the brigands, and—"

"But surely then we are certain of rescue?" interrupted the merchant. "The soldiers must needs make short work of such scoundrels as these."

"If they could only catch them; but that is not so easy. And if they did so they would not find us alive. It is this man's invariable custom to kill his captives if he cannot keep them."

"That is what he has been trying to persuade me," said Mr. Brown; "but I am not going to believe such nonsense. We are British subjects, and the thing is incredible, Mr. Litton. I would have dared him to do his worst had it not been for dear Lillian." Here a tear stole down the old man's white cheek. "She was weak and ailing when they took her, and I tremble for what may be the effects of such rude treatment. O Mr. Litton, what an ass I was to listen to Sir Reginald's advice and leave old England for such a country as this! How long will it be before we get out of it?"

"It is impossible, my dear sir, to guess at that. What I would implore you to persuade yourself is, that your position is a matter of life and death, in which no sacrifice can be considered too great a one. I am instructed by this man to treat with you concerning your ransom."

"Yes, yes!" cried Corrali; "now you are coming to it at last. It is well you should make milord come to reason."

"What I would advise, Mr. Brown," said Walter, "is that you should be firm on one point, namely, to pay nothing whatever until your daughter is placed in safety with her sister."

"How much does he say?" exclaimed Corrali. "I should like to hear him come to the point. Will he pay me my six hundred thousand ducats?"

"You must be mad, Captain Corrali!" exclaimed Walter. "There is no man alive, unless you caught your king himself, who could pay such a sum as that."

"You mean no Sicilian; but there are plenty Ingleses. They are made of gold; I know it. Nothing is good enough for them and nothing too dear. A man who has a pleasure ship of his own too! My demands are too moderate; if anything is amiss with them that is it. You tell him what I say. Six hundred thousand ducats or he is a dead man."

"This man says, Mr. Brown, that you must pay him a hundred thousand pounds or he will kill you."

The old merchant started to his feet so quickly that Corrali drew back a pace and

laid his hand upon his girdle. "A hundred thousand grandmothers! Did any one ever hear of such a sum except in the bank cellars! I will not give him a hundred thousand pence."

"Ay, the bank!" put in Corrali, again recognizing a scrap of what was said; "now that is like coming to business. He is talking of Gordon's bank at Palermo, is he not? That is where the money will come from."

"He is talking of nothing of the kind," said Walter. The excitement of the merchant, which had certainly testified to the extravagance of the demand as strongly as any words could have done, had not been thrown away upon the brigand chief. "He was saying that no private person, even in England, could pay such a sum. He has not got it to give nor yet the half of it."

"Then he shall die!" cried the brigand, "and you along with him."

"It may be so, Captain Corrali, for it lies within your power to kill us!"

"Ay, and to do more—to roast you!"

"It is in your power to do anything to us that you are wicked enough to imagine; but it is not in this man's power to pay the sum you propose. We shall die sooner or later at all events, and in the end you will be taken and hanged for it. If you consider such a course of conduct advantageous you must pursue it. For my part, if I were in your place I would be a little more reasonable."

"You do not know me, Signor Inglesse, or you would not dare to speak to me thus," said the brigand to Walter. "Are we lawyer and client, that you give me advice of this sort and cross my will when I have expressed it?"

"I would not cross it if I could help it, Captain Corrali; but your demands are those of a man who wishes to have our blood by demanding of us an impossibility."

"It is possible that you may be speaking the truth," answered Corrali after a pause. "If this man has really but three hundred thousand ducats, with that I must be content. But if he does not possess them, then let him prepare for death, since for a less sum he shall never escape alive out of my hands. And let him come to his conclusion within ten minutes, for my patience has reached its limit." As he said these words the brigand produced one of the various watches that adorned his person, and placed it on the ground before him, where it formed a spot of sunshine in that shady place.

Walter translated this ultimatum to the old merchant, and added an expression of his own belief that nothing less than the sum now named would satisfy the brigand. "Fifty thousand pounds!" cried the old man. "Why that will be ruin, Mr. Litton—beggary!"

Walter did not believe that this was true. It was quite possible that such a sum was as great as even the merchant's credit could have realized in ready money so far from home; but it could surely not be his whole fortune; and in his heart he wondered how, considering the position of Lillian, her father should have hesitated to give in to terms that were yet practicable. He did not know how dear is wealth to those who have much of it, especially when it has been acquired by their own hands. Moreover he did not take into sufficient account the natural incapacity of the owner of Willowbank, Regent's Park, to believe in the menaces of their captor. Mr. Christopher Brown had probably never read that matchless tale of M. Dumas, wherein he describes how the banker in the hands of brigands is charged a hundred thousand francs for an egg not particularly fresh, and at a similar rate for all other necessities of the table till his bill for board equals the ransom he has declined to pay; and if he had read them he would have taken them for romances. He was scarcely more capable of realizing his present circumstances than he would have been of imagining them if they had not occurred. And though he saw himself fallen among thieves and wholly in their power, he found it hard to believe that they would venture on such extremities as Walter had foreshadowed. In this matter the brigand chief (who had doubtless had the opportunity of observing such workings of the mind in others of his captives) had gauged the merchant with considerable accuracy.

"No," persisted Mr. Brown; "let the scoundrel do his worst; his sickle shall never reap all the harvest of my life of honest toil. I will die rather than submit to it!"

"Alas! sir, it is not a question of dying, if what we have heard of this man's cruelties is true," urged Walter, "but of far worse than death; and it is not your life nor mine that is alone at stake. Consider your daughter, and how every moment of delay may be fraught with peril to her."

"Consider!" echoed the merchant with irritation. "Do you suppose then that she has escaped my consideration? I am thinking whether she would thank me for saving her, since it must needs be done at such a sacrifice to her of wealth, position and comfort. Three hundred thousand ducats! It is monstrous! It is incredible!

Two thousand pounds a year forever in return for two nights' involuntary lodging upon a mountain-side. I will never give it!"

The force and passion of these protestations, however, suggested to Walter that the merchant was wavering in his stubborn resolve.

"The question is, Mr. Brown," observed he, "is it within your power to command so vast a sum or not?"

"I have a good name on Change, sir!" answered the other with an assumption of dignity; "and a good name there is good everywhere else."

"Then, for Heaven's sake, use it!" exclaimed Walter. "Why, if you died, sir, under this man's tortures, and Lillian died—for, in the stress and strain of their common misfortune, he spoke of her familiarly and her father listened without reproach—'what would Lady Selwyn say? would she thank you, because your obstinate resolve had enriched her by the sacrifice of a father and a sister?"

"True, true," answered the old man as if talking to himself; "all would in that case go to Lotty, which would mean to him."

By chance Walter had hit upon an argument more convincing than any which logic could have suggested. "Mr. Litton, it is a hard case; but I will be guided by you."

"The ten minutes are ever," observed the brigand, taking up his watch. "Has milord come to his right mind?"

"Mr. Brown will pay the money, Captain Corrali—that is, if so huge a sum can be raised in Palermo upon his credit—on one condition. His daughter must be set free on the spot; the letter of authorization must be delivered to the banker by her hand. It would otherwise be valueless, since he would conclude it to have been extorted by force."

"That shall be done," answered the brigand quietly; "we have no wish to retain the signora. It is a pleasure to me, I assure you, to reflect that we are to remain good friends." Here pens, ink and paper for the authorization; and once more the chief produced from an outside pocket these business materials, which were almost as much his implements as the musket.

"My friend must see his daughter before she goes," observed Walter. There was something in the brigand's manner that had aroused his suspicions.

"That is impossible," answered Corrali, "since milord does not speak Sicilian. No word is allowed to pass between a prisoner about to be released and one who is still retained captive unless in our own language. The signora will take the authorization—which will be read by a friend of ours who is acquainted with the English tongue—but we must take care that she has no secret instructions. I regret to forbid an interview so naturally agreeable, but the precaution is one which will recommend itself to milord's good sense."

"But for all we know the signora may be unfit for travel, too ill to bear the journey, or you may not let her free after you have promised to do so."

"The signor should remember that without her personal presence at the banker's the ransom could not be obtained," answered Corrali. "If the assurance of her being alive is all that is required, the signor can see her himself, since you both speak our language, but not milord."

When this was communicated to Mr. Brown he did not make the opposition to this harsh announcement that Walter had expected; the fact was that, though he loved his daughter, he was singularly free from sentiment as such; in this matter he looked to the main facts, and provided that he could feel assured that Lillian was safe, he could forego the parting caress. Moreover, he conceived that all difficulties in the way of his own freedom would be at once removed, and that the next day would see him once more on board the Sylphide, never to touch land again until they reached the British soil.

"Go and see her, Mr. Litton," said he. "Give her my fondest love and tell her how it is that I am debarred from bidding her good bye. Bid her hasten matters with the bankers all she can. Since I must pay this money, the sooner it is done the better."

Walter wondered greatly how Mr. Brown could comfort himself with such reflections at such a time, much more recommend them to others.

Then the merchant drew out the authorization in brief and concise terms. It was unnecessary to dilate upon his necessitous position, since all the world of Palermo was by this time acquainted with it; but he was careful, at the chief's suggestion, to add that all the ransom must be paid in gold. His name was well known to the bankers, to whom he had been duly recommended; and there was his son-in-law, Sir Reginald, to vouch for him. He did not doubt that the money—which in London he could have produced in a few hours—would be forthcoming in a day or two at the farthest. He did not comprehend that the raising of the money was only one of the difficulties that might interpose between them and freedom.

"There!" said Mr. Brown, when he had

signed the document and the other two had witnessed it.

To sign away so large a sum seemed to him like the loss of a limb; but when once it was gone he wiped it off the books of his mind like a bad debt, and commenced the business of life again under new conditions.

"And now, gentlemen," said Corrali, who had at once possessed himself of the document, "the sooner we get on with this little business the better for all parties.—Santoro!"

At the sound of his name Walter's body guard made his appearance; he had decked himself out even more splendidly than before, having been lent some personal ornaments by his friends.

"I see," said the captain, addressing his follower, "that you have made up your mind to see Lavocca, and the opportunity now offers itself. The signor here is to be conducted to the cavern."

"The cavern!" exclaimed Santoro, as though he could hardly believe his hearing.

"Yes; did I not say so? Colletta and yourself will be answerable for his safety, and he will be entrusted to you two alone.—If you have any last words for milord," added he, addressing Walter, "you had better say them."

"Mr. Brown," said Walter, "I am going. Have you anything to add to what you have already said as respects your daughter?"

"Nothing, but my love and blessing, Mr. Litton. But as respects yourself I would wish to say, in case anything should happen to either of us ere we meet again, that I am deeply sensible of the goodwill towards me and mine, which has caused you to share our misfortune. I confess that I behaved ill to you at Willowbank, and that my first impression of your character was the true one." Walter's only answer was to hold out his hand, which the other took and pressed warmly. "You will tell me the truth about my Lillian," said the old man; "you will conceal nothing from me. It is uncommon hard, because a man only speaks his mother tongue, that he may not say good bye to his daughter. But it will be only for a few days, will it? We shall be on board the yacht again before the week's out, eh?"

"Indeed, sir, I hope you will," said Walter; but since it was Thursday even then, he doubted it.

"If Lillian gets to Palermo this afternoon, you see," argued Mr. Brown, "the money can be collected before night, and sent up here the first thing in the morning. I assure you it is not pleasant sleeping under these beech trees. At all events, I do trust the people at Gordon's will take care that we do not spend our Sunday in such society as this, and he pointed to the members of the band, who had already gathered round to see Walter and his guards depart upon their expedition. The picture of the honest merchant as he stood without his leafy tent bidding adieu to him in such sanguine words, and denouncing the spectators, was fated often to recur to Walter's mind with a sad sense of contrast.

(To be Continued.)

SAVE THE DEAR CHILDREN.

The children of nervous and irritable parents will to some extent inherit these dreaded troubles, and show them as they grow up. These ailments will be intensified when the children devote themselves to school studies. Their delicate systems and overtaxed nerves will soon feel the severe strain, and the certain result is a very brief life.

We see, daily, young children afflicted with twitching muscles, general nervousness, dizziness and irritableness. These troubles bring on that dreaded disease, St. Vitus Dance, with all its involuntary movements and spasms.

Such children require immediate attention. Paine's Celery Compound is now acknowledged to be the great agent and remedy for all these depressing symptoms. It tones up and strengthens the weak nervous system, builds up the body and health, and restores to natural activity and perfect action every muscle, and purifies and cleanses the whole system. Do not allow the dear children to suffer and die early, while Paine's Celery Compound guarantees health and long life. Save the children from all ills; they are the hope of our country.

Just What Was The Matter.

"Why, Pat," said the Judge, picking up the bruised form, "you seem to have met an adverse fate."

"Adverse fate is it, yer ahnner? I should say that same. Mallony kicked me clean off the floor."

Verifying a Statement.

Pa—Blanche! I wish to caution you against giving that young Twaddle any encouragement; he's not the style of man I fancy.

Blanche—Don't worry, pa, about my cultivating any fondness for him. He makes me tired.

Bub—That's so, pa, he made sis so tired last night that she had to set on his lap to rest.