TRUE TO HIS WORD.

A NOVEL.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE COMMISSION.

At the little dinner party at Willowbank that afternoon there was not much talk, yet Walter thought that he had never enjoyed so pleasant a meal; Mr. Brown did his best, though it evidently cost him an effort to play the host, and if his civilities had something of patronage about them, the young painter was in no humor to resent it. The rich man's swelling sense of importance, and decisive manner of laying down the law, as though wealth could confer the power of judging rightly on all subjects, did not even amuse him; for this old man, the father of Lotty and of Lilian, had awakened a strange interest within him. Lilian, accustomed to be silent in her father's presence, spoke but little, yet all she did say had sense and kindness in it; when they spoke of art she exhibited no raptures, such as most women use when they wish to be thought enthusiastic; nor, on the other hand, did she advance her opinions under cover of that sorry shield of pretended ignorance: "I know nothing about it, you know; please tell me if I am wrong, &c.," which so often conceals a stubborn conceit. When her father became taciturn, as he often did, she knew how to rouse him from his moody thoughts by starting some subject pertaining to his own pursuits, and whenever a hitch occurred—some point of difference between host and guest, such as, from the total dissimilarity of their characters, could not at times but arise—she smoothed it away with some graceful jest. It was not without some secret sense of disloyalty that Walter found himself comparing the two sisters with one another, to the disadvantage of the absent one. Lotty had certainly never exhibited such tact and graciousness, but in her case there had been no such opportunity for their display; she had had no judgments to pass, no opinions to offer, no feelings even to express, except with respect to one person and one object. Perhaps, when Lilian came to be in love, her thoughts would also be inclosed in the same narrow circle. Since they were so broad and comprehensive, it was probable that she was not in love, and that was somehow a very pleasant reflection to Walter. We have all experienced, I suppose—we men—in our time, a satisfaction at feeling confident that the charming young person by whom we are seated for an hour or so, even if we are never to see her again, is, for the present, fancy free; that she can feel an interest in what we say, if not in ourselves; that she has thoughts, which she can interchange with us, of her very own; that she is not as yet absorbed, as young ladies sooner or later become, in the individuality of some one of the opposite sex, not at all likely (taking the average of male creatures) to be in any way superior to ourselves. In Walter's case the consciousness that there was a secret between Lilian and himself gave intensity to this pleasure, yet no one will surely venture to assert that he had fallen in love with his young hostess. The recollection of the circumstances that had admitted him to her presence must alone have been sufficient to preserve him from such folly; he was poorer even than his friend the captain; his future was even still less promising; and, after the experience of his host's conduct towards her whom Lilian had herself described as his favorite daughter, what hope could there be of Mr. Brown's looking with favor—nay, with patience—at the pretensions of such a suitor as Mr. Walter Litton! At all events, Mr. Christopher Brown, who was said to be worth a plum, the fruit, too, of his own planting, and who had a great character for good judgment in the city, was evidently of the opinion that no such maggot could have entered into his young guest's brain, as will be seen from a certain proposition he made to him after dinner.

That period "across the walnuts and the wine" had been looked forward to by Walter with some dismay: he would have liked to have gone at once into the drawing-room, and listened to Lilian's playing on the piano, a little nearer than at the distance it now came to him through the wall; or, if that might not have been, even to have left Willowbank at once, and finished the evening with his friend Jack over the fragrant pipe. He felt that wealth was not the only thing that he had not in common with this friendly Crœsus, and that an "unpleasant quarter of an hour," and, perhaps, a good deal more—for his host had ordered spirits-and-water for himself—was lying before him. If he would only talk of Lotty, then, indeed, he would try his very best to do her some service; but that he should choose such a topic to converse on with an utter stranger seemed to the last degree improbable. It was to his great relief, therefore, that so soon as the young lady had withdrawn, his host observed: "You smoke, of course?" for tobacco, amongst its other priceless benefits, confers the advantage of silence without embarrassment. "There are some cigars, young gentleman, such as you have seldom tasted," added the old man, as the box was handed round; "they cost me three guineas a pound, though I imported them myself."

"They are excellent, no doubt, sir; but I hope you will not feel aggrieved if I take a pipe instead: I am accustomed to pipes, and do not wish to acquire extravagant habits."

Walter said this in joke, since, as a matter of fact, he greatly preferred a pipe to a cigar, but his companion took him au pied de la lettre.

"That shows you are a very sensible young fellow," said he approvingly. "I did not take to smoking myself till I was long past your age, because I couldn't afford it; and I would have smoked pipes if they had agreed with me. As it was, I smoked cheroots. Can you guess why?"

"Well, no, sir; these things are so much a matter of fancy."

"I never do anything from fancy, Mr. Litton, and I never did. I smoked cheroots, partly because they were cheaper, partly because I hated the extravagance of biting off the end of a cigar and throwing it away. The wasting of that end was a positive wickedness in my eyes—a mere wanton sacrifice to the caprices of fashion."

"I see," said Walter, amused at his host's devotion to principle in such a matter; "and I suppose you put the small end of the cheroot in your mouth instead of the big end?"

"Most certainly I did," returned his companion seriously; "a man who does otherwise is, in my opinion, a mere wasteful puppy."

"But they say it draws better."

"That's rubbish," interrupted the other; "a transparent device of the manufacturer, to cause a greater consumption of the material he supplies. Why, you ought to know that, since you know so much about 'drawing,' eh?" and the old gentleman stirred his toddy, and expressed that species of satisfaction peculiar to persons who do not often make jokes, but when they do, flatter themselves that they are successful.

Walter laughed, as in duty bound, and said it was very polite in Mr. Brown to give him credit for knowledge in his calling.

"Not at all, sir; I never pay compliments," said his host. "I know something about your "art," as you painters are so fond of calling it, though I have paid for it pretty dearly. There is more than a thousand pounds 'locked up,' as I call it, in this house—the interest of money that I have spent in pictures. It is not a bad investment in these days to those who can stand the immediate loss. O yes, you can draw and paint too, Mr. Litton! Now, with respect to this picture 'Supplication'—here his voice became suddenly grave and earnest—"did it take you long?"

"Well, yes, sir; many months. But it need not have done so had I not lingered over it: one does, you know, over work that pleases one."

"Just so; I have done it myself," answered the other thoughtfully; "many and many a day, when all the other clerks had left, have I sat at my desk conning over every figure; but your figures are very different, eh?"

The old gentleman's tone was still jocose, yet it was evident from his manner that he was upon a topic that had a serious interest for him.

"Did you paint this picture from—from the life?"

"I did, sir; that is, a model sat to me for it."

"A model? Do you mean a young lady?" asked Mr. Brown in a voice that in its eager curiosity was almost anxious.

"Yes; a young woman sat for the picture; it was originally intended to be a portion of an historical work; I painted her as Queen Philippa beseeching her husband to spare the citizens of Calais: only there is no King Edward and no citizens."

"Ah, indeed!" Then, after a pause: "You recognized the likeness to my daughter Lilian, I perceived?"

"Well, yes, sir."

"And yet you never saw her before, I suppose?"

"Never, to my knowledge."

"Well, I should like another portrait of her, this time taken from the life, but treated in the same style, so as to make, as it were, a companion picture. Is there not some one in history—some girl—who had no necessity to plead for pardon, either for herself or others; one whose character was faithful, dutiful, unselfish?"

"There is Joan of Arc, sir," reflected Walter; "a hackneyed subject, it is true; but so, for that matter, is Philippa. I could paint your daughter in that character: faithful, dutiful, helpful for others, cheerful, in spite of adverse fate; but it would put the young lady to some inconvenience; these historical subjects take more time than ordinary portraits."

"I see. But can you not, as in the other case, get some one else to sit, in the proper costume and so forth—the same, perhaps, as sat before—and then, for the features and expression, paint from my daughter herself?"

"That is possible, sir; but I cannot promise to produce so good a likeness as in the first instance, where I had no original before me. These chance successes are difficult to repeat. There is an old story of a painter who could not paint a cloud to his liking, and, in his irritation, threw the brush at the canvas, which made by accident the very effect he wished to produce; but if he had thrown the brush a second time, it would probably not have made a second cloud. I will do my best, however."

"No man can do more, sir. We will consider that as settled, and I will give you the three hundred pounds for the Joan which you refused for the Philippa. Yes, yes; I must have my own way this time; and Lilian will sit to you when you wish."

"Under the circumstances, I shall not need to trouble her for some time; the preliminary work will take"——

"Well, well, begin it at once, that's all," interrupted his host impatiently. "You gentlemen of the brush are rather slow in your movements; it is the same with the painters and glaziers, whom one can never get out of the house. Now, I suppose I shall not be able to get this Philippa picture till the autumn, shall I?"

"Not till after the Academy is closed. No, sir; I fear not."

"Well, that's a great injustice. When a picture is bought and paid for, one ought to do what one likes with it; that's my notion of property."

"But consider, sir, if everybody acted upon that idea, what blank spaces there would be on the walls before the Exhibition was over!"

"Pooh, pooh; let them paint the walls."

It was clear the old gentleman was getting irritable. Up to this point, Walter felt that he had made a favorable impression, and, much as he wished to see Lilian again, he feared this impression might be marred by his delaying longer at Willowbank that evening. The gout was evidently beginning to trouble his host, and there were indications in his manner which showed he was growing impatient of the presence of his young guest.

"Well, if you will allow me, Mr. Brown, I will set about this affair of your daughter's picture—since you seem to be in a hurry for it—at once; it is still early, so that I may, perhaps, this very evening secure the services of my model for to-morrow."

"An excellent thought, Mr. Litton," returned the old gentleman with an eagerness that showed how accurately his guest had read his wishes. "Yes, yes; I like to see a young man prompt in business. My daughter is also my nurse, and just now I require her services; so perhaps you will excuse her entertaining you in the drawing-room. I will make your compliments to her for you; and drop me a line when you are ready to paint her. Good-bye, sir, good-bye." And in five minutes Walter found himself on the other side of the lodge gate and in the world of London.

The events of the last few hours seemed to him like a dream, and yet the result of them had been very material. He had a cheque for a hundred pounds in his pocket, and had obtained a commission which would bring him in three hundred more. But this was the least part of what had happened to him. He was conscious of a complete revolution in his own feelings. He adored Lotty still with the same honest devotion as of old; his interest in her was just as great, and his desire to help her had even become active instead of passive; but there was not the same sense of hopelessness within him as he had experienced heretofore. He had not transferred his allegiance to her sister; he was loyal as ever to her cause; but he felt, for the first time, that his allegiance might be due elsewhere than to Lotty. His position was somewhat analogous to that of a wavering Jacobite, who could own a king de facto as well as a king de jure. What astonished him most was that he felt no regret that he had sold his picture; he endeavored to account for this by the reflection that it was passing into the hands, not of strangers, but of those who had a greater right to it than himself; but what undoubtedly more compensated him for its loss was the fact that he was about to paint its companion-portrait from the life; that he must needs spend days, perhaps weeks, at Willowbank with Lotty's sister, and so, in a manner, would have the original beside him to console him for the absence of the copy.

The first step to be taken was to seek out little Red Riding-hood, and to covenant with her for certain sittings which were to be commenced forthwith; and to this end he bent his way towards her humble dwelling. It was a mere business affair to him—just as buying stock would have been to Mr. Christopher Brown—and the only consideration that he had in his mind was, what increase should be made in Miss Nellie Neale's rate of pay for her services, which should in some measure reflect his own good fortune, and yet not spoil the market? But the romance of that eventful afternoon was by no means over for him yet.

CHAPTER XIV.

NELLIE'S LOVER.

The private residence of Mr. Neale, as distinguished from his professional abode at the corner of Beech street (which was, in fact, a cellar, though it was called a stall), was quite a palatial dwelling, if he had occupied the whole of the premises himself; but of the five rooms of which the house was composed, he let out two to lodgers, and, therefore, the parlor on his ground floor was not dedicated solely to the reception of visitors; it was the dining-room, and also the kitchen, whereby, let us hope, that great desideratum, heat, was always insured for his mutton chops and the plates that they were served upon. But Mr. Neale, it is to be feared, did not often rejoice in mutton chops; it was a dish that very, very rarely was tasted, or even smelt, by the inhabitants of Little Grime street, in which he lived. The day on which there was bacon enough for himself and his four children, including Nellie, who was the only one grown up, was a feast day with the family, and one which he would have marked with a white stone if he had known how to do it. There was some sort of cookery, however, in progress when Mr. Walter Litton looked in, sufficient, at all events, to call forth the apologies of the cobbler, who was himself superintending it; while his three little girls were arranging the supper table, quite in the Russian fashion, with a lettuce of the size of a parasol and some remarkable fine onions.

"It is not for you to apologize, but for me, Mr. Neale, for having intruded on your supper hour," said Walter, patting the curly head of the smallest girl. "Why, your board looks like Covent Garden, little missis."

"Well, yes, sir," answered the cobbler, stirring the vessel on the fire with a large iron spoon; "when meat is scarce, we makes it up with vegetables; they are always wholesome, and they're very filling. Won't you take a chair, Mr. Litton?"

The cobbler was a great favorite of Walter's, and the regard was reciprocal. The worthy man had long lost his wife, and had had a hard time of it in endeavoring to bring up his four girls in comfort and respectability; he was obliged to be much away from home, nor had he been able to afford to hire any one to look after them in his absence; but they were good girls, he said, "and the Lord be praised," he said it "which shouldn't;" and the elder ones had "seen to" their juniors, and when nine years old were better housekeepers than many young ladies are found to be who marry at nineteen. He had a hearty, cheerful face, not at all handsome, but with an honest pride in it; and though his locks were grizzled, he looked as though there was happiness for him yet, such as a man generally contrives to find who works for others and does his duty by them.

"Where's Nellie?" inquired Walter, "that you are doing the cooking, Mr. Neale?"

"Well, it's only tripe, sir," answered the cobbler; "and she knows I'm equal to that. She'll be home in a minute or two; indeed, I thought it was her when you came in."

"It's rather late for her to be out, is it not?" said Walter.

"Well, no, sir; not this beautiful summer weather; the cool air does her good, and I ain't afraid of her getting harm in other ways, thank God! Nelly's a good girl, if ever there was one. But she ain't well, sir. Perhaps you haven't noticed it, but the last few days she has seemed to me more white and spiritlesslike, and she's been ailing off and on ever since the spring."

"I have not seen any change in her of late at all," said Walter gravely.

"I daresay not, sir; but then, you see, you're not her father. Not but that you have behaved as kind and honest to her as though you were, Mr. Litton. I have reason to be thankful to you on many accounts, Heaven knows! Your having her to sit for you so constant is a great help to us, though I wish it would be in the mornings, as it used to be, and not so late in the day. By the time you have done with her, and she has made her little purchases for the house, it's getting on for bedtime, and I scarcely see anything of her now."

"I wish her to come in the mornings," said Walter quietly; "that will suit me better, as it happens, for the future. Will you ask her to come in to-morrow at the old time instead of the afternoon? She will understand if you just say that."

"I will tell her, sir, and with great pleasure."

"Yes; but don't tell her that I called, Mr. Neale; say I sent round a message, will you? I have a reason for it."

"A reason for it?" said the cobbler. "Deary me! She has not offended you, I hope?"

"Not at all. The fact is, I have some news for her; and I wish to tell it her myself. I have just sold the picture for which she sat for a good sum, and I think I can afford her a little better pay."

"Indeed, sir, you are very good. Why, it is only the other day—not a month ago—since you increased it. She has been even able to save some money to give herself a few days at the seaside next month, which we are in hopes will do her good."

"Indeed," said Walter dryly. "Well, just give her my card, with these few words on it, and don't say a word—nor let her sisters say one—of my having called here."

The old cobbler promised readily; and the little girls, delighted at the surprise that was awaiting their sister on the morrow, and the nature of which they thoroughly appreciated, promised also. Indeed, as Walter quitted that humble roof, he left the whole family radiant. But the smile faded off his own lips so soon as he had shut the door behind him. Had poor little Red Riding-hood gone to the bad? was his first thought; and the conviction that it was so gave him the sincerest sorrow. He was frank and simple in character, but it was not through ignorance of the ways of the world, and especially of the London world. Directly the old cobbler had said: "Perhaps you haven't noticed it, but the last few days Nellie has looked white and spiritless," he had at once grasped the fact that she was deceiving her father, and making a pretended engagement in his studio an excuse for her absence from home. He had not himself set eyes on the girl for seven weeks. Most persons in his place would at once have blurted out the truth, but he had not had the heart—that is, the hardness of heart—to do so. Any time would be time enough to tell the poor old man of his daughter's shame, if she had stooped to shame; and it might be possible to spare him even yet. If Nellie knew that he had called in person, she would conclude that he had discovered her deceit, and would perhaps have refused to come to Beech street. His common sense told him that in such a case there was extreme danger of precipitating a catastrophe; many a girl on the road to ruin has been hurried on to that fatal goal by the reproaches of those who have taken it for granted that it has been already reached. That it had been reached by poor Nellie, Walter had only too much cause to fear. That she had taken money from some one, pretending that it was her earnings in Beech street, was a bad sign indeed; while that talk of a few days at the sea seemed to point only too surely to her intention of leaving home at no distant date with her betrayer. But until he was certain of this he resolved to shield Red Ridinghood not only from evil to come, if that might be possible, but also from reproach for what had passed; and to conceal what he had learned even from his friend Pelter, though Jack himself had shown a kind interest in Nellie. It was not so much far-sighted prudence—the reflection that a girl's good name once spoken against is not to be lightly cleared, even from groundless scandal—as sheer tenderness of heart which actuated Walter in this matter, and which was at once his strength and his weakness. If it had caused him to "philander" with a married woman, it also kept his lips sealed as with the seal of confession with respect to the frailties of a single one. He had plenty to tell Jack (though he by no means told him all) with reference to his visit to Willowbank, without touching on any other subject, and they sat up together half the night discoursing upon it. Jack thought Mr. Christopher Brown ought to have come down more handsomely in the case of Philippa (for Walter had not told him how he had been tempted by "advances" and refused them, and given way in the end to sentiment): "A hundred pounds is far too little to have taken from so big a fish as Mr. Brown; but, on the other hand, he will be punished for his parsimony by giving three hundred for your next picture, which won't be half so good. No, sir. Mark my words: Joan will be comparatively a failure. The inspiration will now be wanting, unless, indeed, you happen to take a fancy to this young lady in duplicate." Walter smiled what he flattered himself was a smile of sadness. "Well, my lad, that is as it may be. I have known a heart dead and buried, as it were, in barren ground, dug up and going again very wholesomely before now. At all events, your material prospects have now become very flourishing indeed, and I congratulate you upon them most heartily. There will be lots of work to do at that house. You will have to paint the old gentleman himself"——

"In lampblack," suggested Walter.

"No, no; I mean Mr. Brown. You must make him very solid and irrefragable; his cheque book lying before him upon that plain desk, which, you may depend upon it, was the one he used when he had but fifty pounds a year and the reversion of his employer's boots. It has the same interest for him, I don't doubt, as Sir Isaac Newton's first arithmetic book or Nelson's earliest toy ship would have for the public. He is one of the great professors of the art of getting money, and understands it thoroughly; but he knows nothing about how to spend it, and you must teach it him. Point out the desirability of his having frescoes upon the staircase walls, and when you have convinced him, give him my card. 'Orders executed for frescoes with punctuality and despatch' shall be printed upon it, expressly to 'fetch' him. I shall rise with you, Watty—I feel it—up that staircase. Let us embrace. Let us drink the health of 'Christie Brown;' it sounds quite poetical. There is Christie Johnson gone, poor thing; and Christie somebody else, I don't know who, but she haunts me. Oh, it's the auctioneer! Well, he's always 'going,' and that's sad too. Bless you, Watty; you are enriched, and yet you are affable!"

From the style of which discourse, it may be gathered that Mr. John Pelter had been wishing luck to his friend for a considerable time, and was rather overcome by his feelings and what he had mixed with them.

"You'll set to work at once, Watty, of course," were his farewell words. "I won't keep you up. Early to bed and early to rise is the way to get—screwed, yes, very screwed, by Jove! But you will set to work at once, for my sake?"

"Yes, yes. Nellie Neale is coming to-morrow morning to sit for Philippa. Good night, Jack; good night." And Jack took himself off with difficulty, stopping more than once upon the stairs to wink at the moon, which was shining very brightly, and to remark that, though so rich, she was affable.

For once Walter did not bewail the weakness to which his friend had given way, for, whenever he so committed himself, he was certain to be late on the ensuing morning, and he did not wish him to see Nellie.

He had little hope that Red Ridinghood would sit as his model any more, and if that should happen, it was better that she should come and go without the observation of a third person. It had seemed easy for him, when in Little Grime street, in presence of her father and sisters, to administer reproof to Red Ridinghood, and to warn her against a course of conduct which musts needs bring shame upon them all; but in his own bachelor apartments, as the hour drew near for him to play the part of Mentor, he became conscious of his personal unfitness for that role, and almost regretted that he had not left her misconduct to be dealt with by her natural guardian and protector. However, it was too late now for retreat, and he had to screw his courage up as best he might, only he could not help wishing that he was the clergyman of the parish, or, at all events, the father of a family. Nellie was always punctual, and at the appointed hour he heard her ring at the door, her well-known step upon the stairs; if he had not heard them, he would hardly have recognized her when she entered. She was as pretty as ever, indeed, perhaps prettier, for loss of color does not detract from your dark beauties; but she looked very pale, and worn and thin; the brightness that had once lit up her face on bidding him good morning was exchanged for a spasmodic smile, which passed away with her salutation, and even before it—"went out," as it were, leaving the fair face blank and desolate. She was no more Little Red Ridinghood, but had grown up to find that there were wolves in the world under a more attractive guise than even one's grandmother. Her dress was always neat, but he noticed that it was made of better material than heretofore.

"My father told me, Mr. Litton, that you had sent last night"——

"I called myself," interrupted Walter quietly, "and saw your father. Take a chair, Nellie."

She was very glad to do so, as he saw, for she trembled from head to foot.

"I—I—didn't understand that you had been there yourself, sir."

"Yes; I wished to see you about sitting for another picture."

"Thank you, sir; but I don't think I can do that at present," answered Nellie quickly.

"And why not?" inquired Walter, looking as much like the clergyman of the parish, or, at all events, the curate, as he could, and adopting a tone such as he considered suitable to ecclesiastical cross-examination.

"Well, Mr. Litton, I have my hands full of other business. There's father and the girls"——

"Nay; your hands are not full of them, Nellie."

(To be Continued.)

Etiquette in Holland.

The man is "lord of all" in Holland, and woman is almost without the shadow of estimation. The typical Dutchman hasn't a particle of the chivalrous about him, and abounds in the arts of slighting and impertinence.

He is a sort of bear, tame and good-natured, but still full of the bruin element. His countrywomen are actually afraid of him, especially when outside their own door. The Dutchwoman lives in constant fear of insult; and when she is out on the street the acts as if she were afraid that her ursine brothers were going to paw, hug or bite her. Not that the men are dangerous, for rarely is it heard that the bears have bitten. Look out on the street, and you will see that the ladies walk in the road and the gentlemen on the sidewalk. Always so, no matter how muddy or dusty the road is, or how many teams are passing. Watch them, and you cannot help but notice that the gentlemen and ladies never speak to each other on the street. That would be a breach of etiquette that society would scarcely pardon. Even when a man meets his wife he is not permitted to ask what he shall bring home for dinner!

The mines along the Union Pacific railway now produce over 1,400,000 tons of coal annually, and the owners are preparing for a much larger output.