

## TRUE TO HIS WORD.

## A NOVEL.

## CHAPTER XXVII (Continued.)

That night Walter slept but little; his brain was busy with guesses at the cause of Lillian's non-appearance on board the yacht. In so fair and strange a clime it seemed so inexplicable that curiosity should not have induced her to come up on deck, unless she was really too unwell to do so. When he fell asleep, it was only to have his apprehensions embodied in grotesque and hideous dreams. In the morning his first movement was to the window, from whence he could command but little of the harbor, yet that little comprising something of what his eyes most yearned for—the delicate spars of "the Inglesse yacht" standing out against the background of a purple hill. For many an hour yet it was in the highest degree improbable that Sir Reginald would be stirring; still he resolved to keep within doors, and thereby avoid the risk of recognition. He had somehow persuaded himself that his usefulness—if it was fated that he should be of use—to Lillian would be invalidated should his presence at Palermo become known. As to the fact of his being resident in the town transpiring by other means, it was not likely that any one should mention the name of so unimportant an individual as himself, who did not even patronize an hotel. At the same time he thought it as well to secure Signor Baccari's silence upon this point, whose tongue was apt to be eloquent upon all subjects, from the least to the greatest; while his son, Francisco, on the other hand, never opened his mouth but to admit a cigarette or a strip of macaroni. As it happened, the master of the house did not put in his usual appearance that morning at Walter's breakfast table, some business having taken him into the town betimes. Late in the afternoon, however, when the Marina was beginning to fill with equipages, he returned even more radiant than usual.

"I have news for you," said he to his lodger. "A great Milord has arrived from England, richer than any that has appeared this season. The hotels, it seems, are not good enough for him, for he remains—he, at least, and his daughter—on board of his own ship, which is fitted up like a palace. He is something tremendous; the whole town is talking of him."

"His name?" inquired Walter, amused by this magnificent description of the self-made merchant.

"His name is Brown; yes; Milord and Milady Brown. Their ship is called the Sylphide. You can see a portion of it from the window. It is, I don't know how many tons—perhaps a thousand."

"Scarcely so many as that, Mr. Baccari," said Walter laughing. "We have seen the whole of it—Francisco and I—last night. We met it coming into harbor. Did he not tell you?"

"He tell? Not he. He is a good son, but he does not talk. I sometimes think that the brigands frightened his voice away, when they got hold of him a year or two ago. What a prize Milord Brown would be for those rascals! How they would coin his blood, if they got hold of him! He is wise to remain on board ship."

"But they could not hurt him in Palermo, I suppose?"

"No, no; not in the town. But if he should take a fancy for pleasure trips, were it only to ascend Monte Pellegrino, let him have soldiers with him and plenty of them."

"It seems to me to be a most creditable thing that you good folks in Palermo should be kept prisoners within your own walls."

"Doubtless it is discredit; but it is better to be a prisoner than to lose your skin. It is safe enough on the Marina here, driving up and down."

"You are easily satisfied," answered Walter laughing.

"Yes; contentment is a blessing, signor. I look out (he was standing at the window) and see these carriages, and though they are very fine—probably the finest in the world—I say to myself: 'Do not be envious, Baccari. For fivepence you can hire something to carry you up and down, which, though not so highly decorated, serves your purpose equally well.' Ah! there are some new faces—your compatriots, signor—a handsome man, though not so good-natured looking as a husband should be, and a charming wife. They form part of the suite of Milord Brown, and are staying at the Hotel de France. Do you know them?"

"Yes; I know them," answered Walter, who, standing behind his host, could watch the passing carriages, secure from the observation of their inmates; "but I do not wish to be recognized. You can keep a secret, Signor Baccari?"

"For a friend's friend, yes," replied the little lodging house keeper theatrically. "The signor does not wish it to be known that he is in the town?"

"Just so. It is important that that gentleman should not know it."

"The gentleman!" answered the other, with a comical look. "I see!"

"I don't want either of them to know it," returned Litton, with a stiffness that was utterly thrown away upon his mercurial companion. "They are not the suite of Milord Brown, as you call him, but members of his family."

Sir Reginald did not certainly resemble a valet—even the best specimen of a gentleman's gentleman would have suffered by contrast with his haughty and supercilious mien as he leaned back in the carriage and stared about him. It was strange how he had lost his once genial smile since the sun of prosperity had risen upon him; perhaps he no longer thought it worth while to wear it, now he had gained his object—the pale and timid-looking girl that sat beside him, and to whom he seldom vouchsafed a word. The carriage, which had been driven to towards the town, did not return up the Marina, and Walter concluded that it was bound for the harbor, and might perhaps return with Lillian and her father. And so it proved. In less than half an hour the same equipage came slowly up the Marina with two more occupants. Lillian with her sister now occupied the front seat; her appearance was greatly altered since he had seen her last; she was not less beautiful than of yore, but her beauty was of another type—that of the hot house flower; a cushion in the carriage was placed behind her head, and her large eyes, as they turned languidly at her father's voice, looked very weary. Would they have lit up, thought Walter, if she could have known that at that moment she was passing beneath his window, and that his gaze was furtively devouring her? Was it possible that the sea voyage alone could have worked thus harmfully with her? Or was this change not rather owing to irksome companionship, to the knowledge of the tyranny that was exercised over Lotty, and to the absence of any one who could sympathize and make common cause with her? Nay, might not even the consideration that a certain true-hearted friend (as she at least knew him to be), one Walter Litton, was separated from her by wide seas, and probably forever, have helped to pale that fair cheek and dull those bright eyes! As the carriage rolled away his gaze dared not follow it, for it must needs have met that of Sir Reginald, whose glance shot hither and thither with contemptuous swiftness, unless when spoken to by his father-in-law, when his face at once assumed the air of respectful attention. Walter knew him well enough to feel not only that he had not schooled himself to such unwonted humility without an object, but that he must also deem the object attainable. Sir Reginald had hated exertion even in his college days, and still more self-denial; but when the prize had seemed of sufficient value he had gone in for as severe training as any devotee of the oar. He was one of those men who are always saying to themselves (instead of "Is it right?"), "Is it worth my while?", and who act accordingly. Undoubtedly, however, Walter was thinking hardly of him. It is not to be supposed, even though his looks might show ill-concealed disfavor towards his sister-in-law, that he was speculating upon her indisposition or general delicacy as likely to end in her death, and therefore in his own aggrandizement; it is more probable that he simply disliked her because he knew that she had found him out and resented his influence with her father. Again, and still again, did the carriage of Milord Brown and family pass Signor Baccari's house, amid an ever-increasing throng of similar vehicles; the crowd of sightseers on foot was also larger than was customary, and among these Walter could see that the new arrivals caused no little excitement. It was not unusual for an English yacht to put into Palermo harbor, but it was evident that some especial interest attached to the proprietor of the Sylphide, whether on account of that report of his vast wealth, which had already reached the ever-open ears of Baccari, or from the beauty of his two daughters. Since this was so, since even in a foreign town and as an utter stranger Mr. Christopher Brown and his belongings were of sufficient importance to make such a sensation, was it not the very height of folly in one like himself—an unknown and penniless painter, thought Walter with a sudden pang—to nourish hopes in connection with Lillian? He acknowledged to himself that it was so; hope—that is, a lover's hope—was out of the question for him; but that he might be of some service to her, he knew not how, against some danger, he knew not what, of that he had still some hope. As if to make up for his absence at his lodger's morning meal, Signor Baccari spread Walter's supper table that evening with his own hands.

"Well," said he, "you saw all your friends. How beautiful are the young ladies! How prosperous looks Milord! How bold and gallant the young gentleman, his son-in-law. He is a soldier, I suppose?"

"Yes, he is a soldier," answered Walter—"a man who has served with great distinction in the war."

"But yet not a favorite of yours, signor?"

"How do you know that?" inquired Walter quickly.

"I merely judged from your countenance—which is Italian in its frankness rather than English—as he drove by. You would not be disappointed, I was about to ask, if ill luck should happen to these compatriots of yours?"

"Ill luck? I don't understand you. Most certainly I wish none of them harm; while as to some of them, the ladies for example, I would rather—infinity rather—that the ill luck, as you call it, no matter how ill it may be, should happen to myself rather than to either of them."

"The signor is very gallant," answered the Sicilian, shaking his head. "But no man is prepared to die for more than one woman—at least one woman at a time."

"To die?"

"Yes, signor, even to die—for it may come to that. Listen to me a little." The lodging house keeper's tones had suddenly become very grave. "You are Signor Pelter's friend, and therefore mine; nay, you are my friend and my son's friend on your own account. Well, you asked me this morning could I keep a secret. Let me on my part ask you the same question: Can you?"

"Certainly I can," answered Walter, more astonished by the gravity with which the other put the question than even by the question itself.

"That is well, since otherwise what I am about to say would, if repeated, cost me dear. On the Marina this morning, beside the carriage people and the good company, there were some queer folks, dressed as fine, mayhap, as the rest; but—brigands!"

"Brigands on the Marina; impossible!" The idea appeared to Walter about as incongruous as highwaymen in Rotten Row or on the West Cliff at Brighton.

"It is nevertheless true, signor. They scent the carcass afar off like vultures, but they are more audacious. They have spies also everywhere. The arrival of Milord Brown reached their ears, no doubt, almost as soon as mine; and they have already identified him."

"Identified him?"

"Well, yes; in a case like this, where so much is involved, it would not do to make mistakes, you see. Such things do occasionally happen. They have caught the wrong Milord before now. An encounter with the king's troops is not to be hazarded for nothing. These gentry like to be sure of their ground."

"But what have the king's troops to do with Mr. Brown?"

"Well," he would hardly be so rash, I conclude, as to move without an escort. On board his ship he is safe, of course, but in no other place. If you are his friend, you had better let him know as much, that is all."

"But the whole story will appear to him an absurdity. He will ask for the proofs of his danger—for the authority that it exists."

"And that, signor, you have given your honor not to reveal. In confidence, however, the case is this: My Francisco, as I told you, was once taken prisoner by these scoundrels. During his captivity he learned not a little of their private ways. There is a certain freemasonry among them, by means of which, for example, they recognize each other to be gentlemen of the same profession—the eyes to the left and a tap of the head, like this. Well, my Francisco was on the Marina yesterday. He is not a great talker, but he has quick eyes—and he saw something."

"I should like to hear what he saw from his own lips," said Walter quietly, beginning for the first time to believe that the thing was serious. Baccari was not only a gossip, but had a capacious swallow for the marvellous; whereas Francisco's information—the little, that is, he had ever condescended to impart—had always proved to be correct.

"No, signor; I cannot permit that," was the Sicilian's unexpected reply. "I have already gone, for your sake and that of friendship's, as far as I dare go. My boy must be able to swear by the Virgin that he never breathed to you one syllable of all this. It is he who will be suspected, you understand—not I—if you should think it well to give Milord Brown a warning."

"I see," said Walter thoughtfully. "Then I am to take it in real earnest that it is your opinion and Francisco's that the brigands are plotting to seize my friends, with the view of exacting ransom?"

"By Santa Rosalia, so it is. If Captain Corrali catches them they will have to pay him handsomely for their lodging."

"Corrali? Then you know the very man, it seems?"

"Not I," answered the other hastily.

"I know nothing. Even what I did know is mine no longer; it is yours."

"You have no advice to offer in addition to this meagre information?"

"Advice against the brigands! Heaven forbid! I have said more than I ought to have done already in the bare fact. You must act as it pleases you."

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

## THE CHASE IN THE CALM.

The information—if such a hint of danger could be called such—that had thus been given by his host to Walter was indeed astounding, but it was not incredible. Short as was the time he had himself been in Palermo, so many and so extraordinary had been the stories he had heard narrated of the vigor and audacity as well as of the crimes of the brigands who haunted its very gates that he was constrained to admit at least the possibility of this new scheme of outrage. His informant, however timid and credulous, had undoubtedly—through his son Francisco—exceptional opportunities of information upon the matter in question; and, moreover, it was pretty evident that he had not told all he knew. The fact that brigands had been even interchanging signs with one another as the occupants of Mr. Brown's carriage passed by was itself alarming; but in all likelihood there had been much more of particularity in the affair than Baccari had stated. No captive worth the trouble of taking had as yet fallen into brigand hands that season; and no doubt, like the wolves after long famine, these wretches were emboldened by necessity, and more apt even than usual for any daring deed. The wealth of the English merchant had probably been much exaggerated to them, and would afford a tempting bait. The time in which they had acquired even that much of information respecting him was, however, so extremely short that, notwithstanding their employment of spies—which was well known to be the case, and who were suspected to exist even in the very hotels at which the proposed victims lodged—it seemed to Walter inexplicable; in his perplexity he found himself inventing the wildest theories to account for it; among them even the notion that Sir Reginald himself had had a hand in the matter crossed his troubled brain. On reflection, however, he admitted this idea to be as monstrous as it was unjust, for how could Lotty's husband, even if it could be shown that it was to his advantage to get his relative kidnapped—which it clearly was not, seeing the ransom must evidently come out of his own pocket—have been able himself, an utter stranger in Palermo, to enter into a nefarious treaty with the brigands of the mountains? The fact of Walter entertaining such a thought even for an instant was, however, a curious proof of the hostility with which he now regarded his quondam friend, the reason of which was not so much what he knew of him as that mistrust of the baronet with which Lillian was inspired, and which she had communicated to him. Of Lillian, however, at present, and in connection with the brigand question, Walter was not thinking; it was rare, indeed, to find the banditti encumbering themselves with female captives, the possession of whom must needs hinder them from making the rapid marches which pursuit so often compelled. Nor did he greatly concern himself with the personal safety of Sir Reginald; his anxiety was solely upon Mr. Brown's account, partly because any outrage such as was contemplated would fall on the worthy merchant, being what he was, with especial severity (Walter had not forgotten the hospitality and kindness he had manifested towards him in old days), but principally because of the distress with which such an event must needs afflict his daughters.

What course, however, to adopt in order to put him on his guard without permitting him or his to guess from whom the friendly warning came was a difficult problem. Any hint directly from himself was out of the question; Walter was firmly resolved—unless an opportunity of doing some great personal service should be vouchsafed him—to keep his proximity to them unknown to any of the party; and moreover any interference on his part was certain to have a base motive assigned to it by at least one member—and he the most influential—of the family. In a word, either his warning would be disregarded as a mere pretence for regaining lost favor or it would be credited at the expense of his own character. It might have been fortunate that he was able to afford them the information, but how should he explain his presence at Palermo, his pursuit of Lillian across the seas! Under the circumstances he decided to do nothing for the moment, but to keep, through Baccari, a strict watch upon the movements of Sir Reginald at the hotel. It would be by that means easy to find out if the party contemplated any expedition without the town, and in that case he would send them warning of its peril.

It seemed, however, as though Milord Brown and his belongings were well content with such objects of interest as Palermo itself afforded. He and his two daughters

were generally to be seen during the fashionable hours driving up and down the Marina, and at other times, when the weather was comparatively cool, visiting the picturesque and ancient churches or making purchases at the quaint old shops. The two girls were both greatly altered from the day on which the young painter had seen them first, and altered for the worse; but the change was of a different kind. In Lotty's case the beauty of youth was dimmed by sorrow and disappointment; her illusions had been rudely destroyed; in her secret heart she doubtless knew that she had risked, and almost lost, her place at her father's hearth for an unworthy object; the man that had once been in her eyes a hero, nay, a demi-god, had shrunk down to mean dimensions; her impassioned lover had become a faithless husband, a tyrant too of whom she stood in fear. Perhaps her happiest moments were those thus passed in the society of those who had once been all in all to her; while he who had usurped their place in her heart—and lost it by his own harshness and infidelity—strolled about the town in his own fashion and followed his own devices. Lillian too, it was plain, was a sufferer, whether from mental or physical causes, but her beauty seemed enhanced rather than diminished by the sad experience. Languid and listless she might be, but the listlessness and languor were not those of a fine lady; it was the idea of the public that she had come to Palermo as a last chance for strength and life, and pity and admiration were the tributes paid to her wherever she moved. In reality, though far from well, she was by no means so ill as these good folks supposed her to be; and what ailed her she kept to herself. Lotty's eyes were often red with irrepressible tears; but Lillian shed none, though she mourned in secret the unhappy condition of her sister and the influence which Sir Reginald exercised over her father. It appeared to Walter, however, who watched the proceedings of the little party with the utmost interest and as closely as the necessity of keeping himself out of their sight permitted him, that this influence was on the wane.

A fortnight had passed away since his host's warning, and he began to congratulate himself that he had not unnecessarily alarmed the merchant and his family by communicating it to them in any way, when a circumstance occurred which seemed to put their safety beyond all question. On going to the window one morning to take his usual feast of sky and sea and mountain before sitting down to breakfast the light spars of the Sylphide had vanished from their usual position.

"Yes, signor," said the voice of Baccari, as Walter stood staring at the vacant place, while a certain void that seemed to answer to it made itself felt in his quick-beating heart; "I am glad to say your friends are saved, and not at my expense; they have saved themselves—which is always the best way of doing it—by leaving Palermo."

"Do you mean to say that the yacht has sailed?"

"Thanks to the Virgin, yes—for Messina. You don't know what I have suffered for the sake of Milord Brown or you would, I hope, look better pleased. Ah, I breathe again! I feel as when I first came on shore after little Francisco fell overboard. You will not catch me meddling with the affairs of other people again, I promise you."

"It does not appear to me that any evil has happened to you—or, indeed, to anybody else—from your communication," remarked Walter dryly.

"Happened? No; but it might have happened. Ah, signor, if we could only see the dangers we have escaped we should have more thankful hearts! Even now I dare not tell you all. Let it suffice—still between ourselves—that Milord Brown has been dogged day and night; they have been so hungry after him that I almost wonder they did not pounce upon him on the Marina. Half Palermo has been in Captain Corrali's pay for the last fortnight. They would have seized him at the very shrine of Santa Rosalia if he had but ventured up Pellegrino. But as it is, he has disappointed everybody—that is, I mean, all the wicked people. Milord is not only very rich, but very wise; he has taken himself off by sea to Messina. Look! yonder is his fine ship."

And truly at that moment the white sail of the English yacht, set to catch every breath of the light Mediterranean breeze, could be seen rounding the harbor point.

"And have all his family gone with him?" inquired Walter, by no means in the tone of triumph with which his companion spoke.

"No, signor, not all the family; his son-in-law and married daughter are still at the hotel, intending, I believe, to follow Milord to-morrow by the steamer. But what do that signify to Corrali—even if he caught him, since the big fish has got through the meshes—since he has lost Milord!"

For weeks Walter's art had been in abeyance; the pre-occupation of his mind, spite of the novelty and splendor of the scenes that presented themselves to his gaze, had kept it so; and now it seem-