

GEORGE MEREDITH

VITTORIA.
VOLUME 5

George Meredith

Vittoria. Volume 5

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CHAPTER XXVI

THE DUEL IN THE PASS

Meanwhile Captain Weisspriess had not been idle. Standing at a blunt angle of the ways converging upon Vittoria's presumed destination, he had roused up the gendarmerie along the routes to Meran by Trent on one side, and Bormio on the other; and he soon came to the conclusion that she had rejected the valley of the Adige for the Valtelline, whence he supposed that she would be tempted either to cross the Stelvio or one of the passes into Southernmost Tyrol. He was led to think that she would certainly bear upon Switzerland, by a course of reasoning connected with Angelo Guidascarpi, who, fleeing under the cross of blood, might be calculated on to push for the mountains of the Republic; and he might judging by the hazards—conduct the lady thither, to enjoy the fruits of crime and love in security. The captain, when he had discovered Angelo's crest and name on the betraying handkerchief, had no doubts concerning the nature of their intimacy, and he was spurred by a new and thrice eager desire to capture the couple—the criminal for the

purposes of justice, and the other because he had pledged his notable reputation in the chase of her. The conscience of this man's vanity was extremely active. He had engaged to conquer the stubborn girl, and he thought it possible that he might take a mistress from the patriot ranks, with a loud ha! ha! at revolutionists, and some triumph over his comrades. And besides, he was the favourite of Countess Anna of Lenkenstein, who yet refused to bring her estates to him; she dared to trifle; she also was a woman who required rude lessons. Weisspriess, a poor soldier bearing the heritage of lusty appetites, had an eye on his fortune, and served neither Mars alone nor Venus. Countess Anna was to be among that company assembled at the Castle of Sonnenberg in Meran; and if, while introducing Vittoria there with a discreet and exciting reserve, he at the same time handed over the assassin of Count Paul, a fine harvest of praise and various pleasant forms of female passion were to be looked for—a rich vista of a month's intrigue; at the end of it possibly his wealthy lady, thoroughly tamed, for a wife, and redoubled triumph over his comrades. Without these successes, what availed the fame of the keenest swordsman in the Austrian army?—The feast as well as the plumes of vanity offered rewards for the able exercise of his wits.

He remained at the sub-Alpine inn until his servant Wilhelm (for whom he had despatched the duchess's chasseur, then in attendance on Vittoria) arrived from Milan, bringing his uniform. The chasseur was directed on the Bormio line, with

orders that he should cause the arrest of Vittoria only in the case of her being on the extreme limit of the Swiss frontier. Keeping his communications alert, Weisspriess bore that way to meet him. Fortune smiled on his strategy. Jacob Baumwalder Feckelwitz—full of wine, and discharging hurrahs along the road—met him on the bridge over the roaring Oglio, just out of Edolo, and gave him news of the fugitives. 'Both of them were at the big hotel in Bormio,' said Jacob; 'and I set up a report that the Stelvio was watched; and so it is.' He added that he thought they were going to separate; he had heard something to that effect; he believed that the young lady was bent upon crossing one of the passes to Meran. Last night it had devolved on him to kiss away the tears of the young lady's maid, a Valtelline peasant-girl, who deplored the idea of an expedition over the mountains, and had, with the usual cat-like tendencies of these Italian minxes, torn his cheek in return for his assiduities. Jacob displayed the pretty scratch obtained in the Herr Captain's service, and got his money for having sighted Vittoria and seen double. Weisspriess decided in his mind that Angelo had now separated from her (or rather, she from him) for safety. He thought it very probable that she would likewise fly to Switzerland. Yet, knowing that there was the attraction of many friends for her at Meran, he conceived that he should act more prudently by throwing himself on that line, and he sped Jacob Baumwalder along the Valtelline by Val Viola, up to Ponte in the Engadine, with orders to seize her if he could see her, and have her conveyed to Cles, in Tyrol.

Vittoria being only by the gentlest interpretation of her conduct not under interdict, an unscrupulous Imperial officer might in those military times venture to employ the gendarmerie for his own purposes, if he could but give a plausible colour of devotion to the Imperial interests.

The chasseur sped lamentingly back, and Weisspriess, taking a guide from the skirting hamlet above Edolo, quitted the Val Camonica, climbed the Tonale, and reached Vermiglio in the branch valley of that name, scientifically observing the features of the country as he went. At Vermiglio he encountered a brother officer of one of his former regiments, a fat major on a tour of inspection, who happened to be a week behind news of the army, and detained him on the pretext of helping him on his car—a mockery that drove Weisspriess to the perpetual reply, 'You are my superior officer,' which reduced the major to ask him whether he had been degraded a step. As usual, Weisspriess was pushed to assert his haughtiness, backed by the shadow of his sword. 'I am a man with a family,' said the major, modestly. 'Then I shall call you my superior officer while they allow you to remain so,' returned Weisspriess, who scorned a married soldier.

'I aspired to the Staff once myself,' said the major. 'Unfortunately, I grew in girth—the wrong way for ambition. I digest, I assimilate with a fatal ease. Stout men are doomed to the obscurer paths. You may quote Napoleon as a contrary instance. I maintain positively that his day was over, his sun was eclipsed, when his valet had to loosen the buckles of his waistcoat and

breech. Now, what do you say?'

'I say,' Weisspriess replied, 'that if there's a further depreciation of the paper currency, we shall none of us have much chance of digesting or assimilating either—if I know at all what those processes mean.'

'Our good Lombard cow is not half squeezed enough,' observed the major, confidentially in tone. 'When she makes a noise—quick! the pail at her udders and work away; that's my advice. What's the verse?—our Zwitterwitz's, I mean; the Viennese poet:—

"Her milk is good-the Lombard cow;
Let her be noisy when she pleases
But if she kicks the pail, I vow,
We'll make her used to sharper squeezes:
We'll write her mighty deeds in CHEESES:
(That is, if she yields milk enow)."

'Capital! capital!' the major applauded his quotation, and went on to speak of 'that Zwitterwitz' as having served in a border regiment, after creating certain Court scandal, and of his carrying off a Wallach lady from her lord and selling her to a Turk, and turning Turk himself and keeping a harem. Five years later he reappeared in Vienna with a volume of what he called 'Black Eagle Poems,' and regained possession of his barony. 'So far, so good,' said the major; 'but when he applied for his old commission in the army—that was rather too cool.'

Weisspriess muttered intelligibly, 'I've heard the remark, that you can't listen to a man five minutes without getting something out of him.'

'I don't know; it may be,' said the major, imagining that Weisspriess demanded some stronger flavours of gossip in his talk. 'There's no stir in these valleys. They arrested, somewhere close on Trent yesterday afternoon, a fellow calling himself Beppo, the servant of an Italian woman—a dancer, I fancy. They're on the lookout for her too, I'm told; though what sort of capers she can be cutting in Tyrol, I can't even guess.'

The major's car was journeying leisurely toward Cles. 'Whip that brute!' Weisspriess sang out to the driver, and begging the major's pardon, requested to know whither he was bound. The major informed him that he hoped to sup in Trent. 'Good heaven! not at this pace,' Weisspriess shouted. But the pace was barely accelerated, and he concealed his reasons for invoking speed. They were late in arriving at Trent, where Weisspriess cast eye on the imprisoned wretch, who declared piteously that he was the trusted and innocent servant of the Signorina Vittoria, and had been visiting all the castles of Meran in search of her. The captain's man Wilhelm had been the one to pounce on poor Beppo while the latter was wandering disconsolately. Leaving him to howl, Weisspriess procured the loan of a horse from a colonel of cavalry at the Buon Consiglio barracks, and mounted an hour before dawn, followed by Wilhelm. He reached Cles in time to learn that Vittoria and her party had passed through it

a little in advance of him. Breakfasting there, he enjoyed the first truly calm cigar of many days. Gendarmes whom he had met near the place came in at his heels. They said that the party would positively be arrested, or not allowed to cross the Monte Pallade. The passes to Meran and Botzen, and the road to Trent, were strictly guarded. Weisspriess hurried them forward with particular orders that they should take into custody the whole of the party, excepting the lady; her, if arrested with the others, they were to release: her maid and the three men were to be marched back to Cles, and there kept fast.

The game was now his own: he surveyed its pretty intricate moves as on a map. The character of Herr Johannes he entirely discarded: an Imperial officer in his uniform, sword in belt, could scarcely continue that meek performance. 'But I may admire music, and entreat her to give me a particular note, if she has it,' said the captain, hanging in contemplation over a coming scene, like a quivering hawk about to close its wings. His heart beat thick; which astonished him: hitherto it had never made that sort of movement.

From Cles he despatched a letter to the fair chatelaine at Meran, telling her that by dainty and skilful management of the paces, he was bringing on the intractable heroine of the Fifteenth, and was to be expected in about two or three days. The letter was entrusted to Wilhelm, who took the borrowed horse back to Trent.

Weisspriess was on the mule-track a mile above the last village

ascending to the pass, when he observed the party of prisoners, and climbed up into covert. As they went by he discerned but one person in female garments; the necessity to crouch for obscurity prevented him from examining them separately. He counted three men and beheld one of them between gendarmes. 'That must be my villain,' he said.

It was clear that Vittoria had chosen to go forward alone. The captain praised her spirit, and now pushed ahead with hunter's strides. He passed an inn, closed and tenantless: behind him lay the Val di Non; in front the darker valley of the Adige: where was the prey? A storm of rage set in upon him with the fear that he had been befooled. He lit a cigar, to assume ease of aspect, whatever the circumstances might be, and gain some inward serenity by the outer reflection of it—not altogether without success. 'My lady must be a doughty walker,' he thought; 'at this rate she will be in the Ultenthal before sunset.' A wooded height ranged on his left as he descended rapidly. Coming to a roll of grass dotted with grey rock, he climbed it, and mounting one of the boulders, beheld at a distance of half-a-dozen stone-throws downward, the figure of a woman holding her hand cup-shape to a wayside fall of water. The path by which she was going rounded the height he stood on. He sprang over the rocks, catching up his clattering steel scabbard; and plunging through tinted leafage and green underwood, steadied his heels on a sloping bank, and came down on the path with stones and earth and brambles, in time to appear as a seated pedestrian when Vittoria turned the

bend of the mountain way.

Gracefully withdrawing the cigar from his mouth, and touching his breast with turned-in fingers, he accosted her with a comical operatic effort at her high notes

'Italia!'

She gathered her arms on her bosom and looked swiftly round: then at the apparition of her enemy.

It is but an ironical form of respect that you offer to the prey you have been hotly chasing and have caught. Weisspriess conceived that he had good reasons for addressing her in the tone best suited to his character: he spoke with a ridiculous mincing suavity:

'My pretty sweet! are you not tired? We have not seen one another for days! Can you have forgotten the enthusiastic Herr Johannes? You have been in pleasant company, no doubt; but I have been all—all alone. Think of that! What an exceedingly fortunate chance this is! I was smoking dolefully, and imagining anything but such a rapture.—No, no, mademoiselle, be mannerly.' The captain blocked her passage. 'You must not leave me while I am speaking. A good governess would have taught you that in the nursery. I am afraid you had an inattentive governess, who did not impress upon you the duty of recognizing friends when you meet them! Ha! you were educated in England, I have heard. Shake hands. It is our custom—I think a better one—to kiss on the right cheek and the left, but we will shake hands.'

'In God's name, sir, let me go on,' Vittoria could just gather

voice to utter.

'But,' cried the delighted captain, 'you address me in the tones of a basso profundo! It is absurd. Do you suppose that I am to be deceived by your artifice?—rogue that you are! Don't I know you are a woman? a sweet, an ecstatic, a darling little woman!'

He laughed. She shivered to hear the solitary echoes. There was sunlight on the farthest Adige walls, but damp shade already filled the East-facing hollows.

'I beg you very earnestly, to let me go on,' said Vittoria.

'With equal earnestness, I beg you to let me accompany you,' he replied. 'I mean no offence, mademoiselle; but I have sworn that I and no one but I shall conduct you to the Castle of Sonnenberg, where you will meet the Lenkenstein ladies, with whom I have the honour to be acquainted. You see, you have nothing to fear if you play no foolish pranks, like a kicking filly in the pasture.'

'If it is your pleasure,' she said gravely; but he obtruded the bow of an arm. She drew back. Her first blank despair at sight of the trap she had fallen into, was clearing before her natural high courage.

'My little lady! my precious prima donna! do you refuse the most trifling aid from me? It's because I'm a German.'

'There are many noble gentlemen who are Germans,' said Vittoria.

'It 's because I'm a German; I know it is. But, don't you see, Germany invades Italy, and keeps hold of her? Providence

decrees it so—ask the priests! You are a delicious Italian damsel, and you will take the arm of a German.'

Vittoria raised her face. 'Do you mean that I am your prisoner?'

'You did not look braver at La Scala'; the captain bowed to her.

'Ah, I forgot,' said she; 'you saw me there. If, signore, you will do me the favour to conduct me to the nearest inn, I will sing to you.'

'It is precisely my desire, signorina.

You are not married to that man Guidascarpi, I presume? No, no: you are merely his . . . friend. May I have the felicity of hearing you call me your friend? Why, you tremble! are you afraid of me?'

'To tell the truth, you talk too much to please me,' said Vittoria.

The captain praised her frankness, and he liked it. The trembling of her frame still fascinated his eyes, but her courage and the absence of all womanly play and cowering about her manner impressed him seriously. He stood looking at her, biting his moustache, and trying to provoke her to smile.

'Conduct you to the nearest inn; yes,' he said, as if musing. 'To the nearest inn, where you will sing to me; sing to me. It is not an objectionable scheme. The inns will not be choice: but the society will be exquisite. Say first, I am your sworn cavalier?'

'It does not become me to say that,' she replied, feigning a demure sincerity, on the verge of her patience.

'You allow me to say it?'

She gave him a look of fire and passed him; whereat, following her, he clapped hands, and affected to regard the movement as part of an operatic scena. 'It is now time to draw your dagger,' he said. 'You have one, I'm certain.'

'Anything but touch me!' cried Vittoria, turning on him. 'I know that I am safe. You shall tease me, if it amuses you.'

'Am I not, now, the object of your detestation?'

'You are near being so.'

'You see! You put on no disguise; why should I?'

This remark struck her with force.

'My temper is foolish,' she said softly. 'I have always been used to kindness.'

He vowed that she had no comprehension of kindness; otherwise would she continue defiant of him? She denied that she was defiant: upon which he accused the hand in her bosom of clutching a dagger. She cast the dagger at his feet. It was nobly done, and he was not insensible to the courage and inspiration of the act; for it checked a little example of a trial of strength that he had thought of exhibiting to an armed damsel.

'Shall I pick it up for you?' he said.

'You will oblige me,' was her answer; but she could not control a convulsion of her underlip that her defensive instinct told her was best hidden.

'Of course, you know you are safe,' he repeated her previous words, while examining the silver handle of the dagger. 'Safe?'

certainly! Here is C. A. to V. . . . A. neatly engraved: a gift; so that the young gentleman may be sure the young lady will defend herself from lions and tigers and wild boars, if ever she goes through forests and over mountain passes. I will not obtrude my curiosity, but who is V A. ?'

The dagger was Carlo's gift to her; the engraver, by singular misadventure, had put a capital letter for the concluding letter of her name instead of little a; she remembered the blush on Carlo's face when she had drawn his attention to the error, and her own blush when she had guessed its meaning.

'It spells my name,' she said.

'Your assumed name of Vittoria. And who is C. A.?'

'Those are the initials of Count Carlo Ammiani.'

'Another lover?'

'He is my sole lover. He is my betrothed. Oh, good God!' she threw her eyes up to heaven; 'how long am I to endure the torture of this man in my pathway? Go, sir, or let me go on. You are intolerable. It 's the spirit of a tiger. I have no fear of you.'

'Nay, nay,' said Weisspriess, 'I asked the question because I am under an obligation to run Count Carlo Ammiani through the body, and felt at once that I should regret the necessity. As to your not fearing me, really, far from wishing to hurt you—'

Vittoria had caught sight of a white face framed in the autumnal forest above her head. So keen was the glad expression of her face, that Weisspriess looked up.

'Come, Angelo, come to me;' she said confidently.

Weisspriess plucked his sword out, and called to him imperiously to descend.

Beckoned downward by white hand and flashing blade, Angelo steadied his feet and hands among drooping chestnut boughs, and bounded to Vittoria's side.

'Now march on,' Weisspriess waved his sword; 'you are my prisoners.'

'You,' retorted Angelo; 'I know you; you are a man marked out for one of us. I bid you turn back, if you care for your body's safety.'

'Angelo Guidascarpi, I also know you. Assassin! you double murderer!

Defy me, and I slay you in the sight of your paramour.'

'Captain Weisspriess, what you have spoken merits death. I implore of my

Maker that I may not have to kill you.'

'Fool! you are unarmed.'

Angelo took his stilet in his fist.

'I have warned you, Captain Weisspriess. Here I stand. I dare you to advance.'

'You pronounce my name abominably,' said the captain, dropping his sword's point. 'If you think of resisting me, let us have no women looking on.' He waved his left hand at Vittoria.

Angelo urged her to go. 'Step on for our Carlo's sake.' But it was asking too much of her.

'Can you fight this man?' she asked.

'I can fight him and kill him.'

'I will not step on,' she said. 'Must you fight him?'

'There is no choice.' Vittoria walked to a distance at once.

Angelo directed the captain's eyes to where, lower in the pass, there was a level plot of meadow.

Weisspriess nodded. 'The odds are in my favour, so you shall choose the ground.'

All three went silently to the meadow.

It was a circle of green on a projecting shoulder of the mountain, bounded by woods that sank toward the now shadowy South-flowing Adige vale, whose Western heights were gathering red colour above a strongly- marked brown line. Vittoria stood at the border of the wood, leaving the two men to their work. She knew when speech was useless.

Captain Weisspriess paced behind Angelo until the latter stopped short, saying, 'Here!'

'Wherever you please,' Weisspriess responded. 'The ground is of more importance to you than to me.'

They faced mutually; one felt the point of his stilet, the other the temper of his sword.

'Killing you, Angelo Guidascarpi, is the killing of a dog. But there are such things as mad dogs. This is not a duel. It is a righteous execution, since you force me to it: I shall deserve your thanks for saving you from the hangman. I think you have heard that I can use my weapon. There's death on this point for you. Make your peace with your Maker.'

Weisspriess spoke sternly. He delayed the lifting of his sword that the bloody soul might pray.

Angelo said, 'You are a good soldier: you are a bad priest. Come on.'

A nod of magnanimous resignation to the duties of his office was the captain's signal of readiness. He knew exactly the method of fighting which Angelo must adopt, and he saw that his adversary was supple, and sinewy, and very keen of eye. But, what can well compensate for even one additional inch of steel? A superior weapon wielded by a trained wrist in perfect coolness means victory, by every reasonable reckoning. In the present instance, it meant nothing other than an execution, as he had said. His contemplation of his own actual share in the performance was nevertheless unpleasant; and it was but half willingly that he straightened out his sword and then doubled his arm. He lessened the odds in his favour considerably by his too accurate estimation of them. He was also a little unmanned by the thought that a woman was to see him using his advantage; but she stood firm in her distant corner, refusing to be waved out of sight. Weisspriess had again to assure himself that it was not a duel, but the enforced execution of a criminal who would not surrender, and who was in his way. Fronting a creature that would vainly assail him, and temporarily escape impalement by bounding and springing, dodging and backing, now here now there, like a dangling bob-cherry, his military gorge rose with a sickness of disgust. He had to remember as vividly as he could realize it, that this man's

life was forfeited, and that the slaughter of him was a worthy service to Countess Anna; also, that there were present reasons for desiring to be quit of him. He gave Angelo two thrusts, and bled him. The skill which warded off the more vicious one aroused his admiration.

'Pardon my blundering,' he said; 'I have never engaged a saltimbanque before.'

They recommenced. Weisspriess began to weigh the sagacity of his opponent's choice of open ground, where he could lengthen the discourse of steel by retreating and retreating, and swinging easily to right or to left. In the narrow track the sword would have transfixed him after a single feint. He was amused. Much of the cat was in his combative nature. An idea of disabling or dismembering Angelo, and forwarding him to Meran, caused him to trifle further with the edge of the blade. Angelo took a cut, and turned it on his arm; free of the deadly point, he rushed in and delivered a stab; but Weisspriess saved his breast. Quick, they resumed their former positions.

'I am really so unused to this game!' said Weisspriess, apologetically.

He was pale: his unsteady breathing, and a deflection of his dripping sword-wrist, belied his coolness. Angelo plunged full on him, dropped, and again reached his right arm; they hung, getting blood for blood, with blazing interpenetrating eyes; a ghastly work of dark hands at half lock thrusting, and savage eyes reading the fiery pages of the book of hell. At last the Austrian

got loose from the lock and hurled him off.

'That bout was hotter,' he remarked; and kept his sword-point out on the whole length of the arm: he would have scorned another for so miserable a form either of attack or defence.

Vittoria beheld Angelo circling round the point, which met him everywhere; like the minute hand of a clock about to sound his hour, she thought.

He let fall both his arms, as if beaten, which brought on the attack: by sheer evasion he got away from the sword's lunge, and essayed a second trial of the bite of steel at close quarters; but the Austrian backed and kept him to the point, darting short alluring thrusts, thinking to tempt him on, or to wind him, and then to have him. Weisspriess was chilled by a more curious revulsion from this sort of engagement than he at first experienced. He had become nervously incapable of those proper niceties of sword-play which, without any indecent hacking or maiming, should have stretched Angelo, neatly slain, on the mat of green, before he had a chance. Even now the sight of the man was distressing to an honourable duellist. Angelo was scored with blood-marks. Feeling that he dared not offer another chance to a fellow so desperately close-dealing, Weisspriess thrust fiercely, but delayed his fatal stroke. Angelo stooped and pulled up a handful of grass and soft earth in his left hand.

'We have been longer about it than I expected,' said Weisspriess.

Angelo tightened his fingers about the stringy grasstuft; he

stood like a dreamer, leaning over to the sword; suddenly he sprang on it, received the point right in his side, sprang on it again, and seized it in his hand, and tossed it up, and threw it square out in time to burst within guard and strike his stilet below the Austrian's collar-bone. The blade took a glut of blood, as when the wolf tears quick at dripping flesh. It was at a moment when Weisspriess was courteously bantering him with the question whether he was ready, meaning that the affirmative should open the gates of death to him.

The stilet struck thrice. Weisspriess tottered, and hung his jaw like a man at a spectre: amazement was on his features.

'Remember Broncini and young Branciani!'

Angelo spoke no other words throughout the combat.

Weisspriess threw himself forward on a feeble lunge of his sword, and let the point sink in the ground, as a palsied cripple supports his frame, swayed, and called to Angelo to come on, and try another stroke, another—one more! He fell in a lump: his look of amazement was surmounted by a strong frown.

His enemy was hanging above him panting out of wide nostrils, like a hunter's horse above the long-tongued quarry, when Vittoria came to them.

She reached her strength to the wounded man to turn his face to heaven.

He moaned, 'Finish me'; and, as he lay with his back to earth, 'Good- evening to the old army!'

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