

GEORGE MEREDITH

VITTORIA.
VOLUME 8

George Meredith

Vittoria. Volume 8

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=36096277

Vittoria – Volume 8:

Содержание

CHAPTER XL	4
CHAPTER XLI	30
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	33

George Meredith

Vittoria – Volume 8

CHAPTER XL

THROUGH THE WINTER

Weisspriess and Wilfrid made their way toward Milan together, silently smoking, after one attempt at conversation, which touched on Vittoria's marriage; but when they reached Monza the officer slapped his degraded brother in arms upon the shoulder, and asked him whether he had any inclination to crave permission to serve in Hungary. For his own part, Weisspriess said that he should quit Italy at once; he had here to skewer the poor devils, one or two weekly, or to play the mightily generous; in short, to do things unsoldierly; and he was desirous of getting away from the country. General Schoneck was at Monza, and might arrange the matter for them both. Promotion was to be looked for in Hungary; the application would please the General; one battle would restore the lieutenant's star to Wilfrid's collar. Wilfrid, who had been offended by his companion's previous brooding silence, nodded briefly, and they stopped at Monza, where they saw General Schoneck in the morning, and Wilfrid being by extraordinary favour in civilian's dress during his leave

of absence, they were jointly invited to the General's table at noon, though not to meet any other officer. General Schoneck agreed with Weisspriess that Hungary would be a better field for Wilfrid; said he would do his utmost to serve them in the manner they wished, and dismissed them after the second cigar. They strolled about the city, glad for reasons of their own to be out of Milan as long as the leave permitted. At night, when they were passing a palace in one of the dark streets, a feather, accompanied by a sharp sibilation from above, dropped on Wilfrid's face. Weisspriess held the feather up, and judged by its length that it was an eagle's, and therefore belonging to the Hungarian Hussar regiment stationed in Milan. "The bird's aloft," he remarked. His voice aroused a noise of feet that was instantly still. He sent a glance at the doorways, where he thought he discerned men. Fetching a whistle in with his breath, he unsheathed his sword, and seeing that Wilfrid had no weapon, he pushed him to a gate of the palace-court that had just cautiously turned a hinge. Wilfrid found his hand taken by a woman's hand inside. The gate closed behind him. He was led up to an apartment where, by the light of a darkly-veiled lamp, he beheld a young Hungarian officer and a lady clinging to his neck, praying him not to go forth. Her Italian speech revealed how matters stood in this house. The officer accosted Wilfrid: "But you are not one of us!" He repeated it to the lady: "You see, the man is not one of us!"

She assured him that she had seen the uniform when she

dropped the feather, and wept protesting it.

"Louis, Louis! why did you come to-night! why did I make you come! You will be slain. I had my warning, but I was mad."

The officer hushed her with a quick squeeze of her inter-twisted fingers.

"Are you the man to take a sword and be at my back, sir?" he said; and resumed in a manner less contemptuous toward the civil costume: "I request it for the sole purpose of quieting this lady's fears."

Wilfrid explained who and what he was. On hearing that he was General Pierson's nephew the officer laughed cheerfully, and lifted the veil from the lamp, by which Wilfrid knew him to be Colonel Prince Radocky, a most gallant and the handsomest cavalier in the Imperial service. Radocky laughed again when he was told of Weisspriess keeping guard below.

"Aha! we are three, and can fight like a pyramid."

He flourished his hand above the lady's head, and called for a sword. The lady affected to search for one while he stalked up and down in the jaunty fashion of a Magyar horseman; but the sword was not to be discovered without his assistance, and he was led away in search of it. The moment he was alone Wilfrid burst into tears. He could bear anything better than the sight of fondling lovers. When they rejoined him, Radocky had evidently yielded some point; he stammered and worked his underlip on his moustache. The lady undertook to speak for him. Happily for her, she said, Wilfrid would not compromise her; and taking her

lover's hand, she added with Italian mixture of wit and grace: "Happily for me, too, he does. The house is surrounded by enemies; it is a reign of terror for women. I am dead, if they slay him; but if they recognize him, I am lost."

Wilfrid readily leaped to her conclusion. He offered his opera-hat and civil mantle to Radocky, who departed in them, leaving his military cloak in exchange. During breathless seconds the lady hung kneeling at the window. When the gate opened there was a noise as of feet preparing to rush; Weisspriess uttered an astonished cry, but addressed Radocky as "my Pierson!" lustily and frequently; and was heard putting a number of meaningless questions, laughing and rallying Pierson till the two passed out of hearing unmolested. The lady then kissed a Cross passionately, and shivered Wilfrid's manhood by asking him whether he knew what love was. She went on:

"Never, never love a married woman! It's a past practice. Never! Thrust a spike in the palm of your hands drink scalding oil, rather than do that."

"The Prince Radocky is now safe," Wilfrid said.

"Yes, he is safe; and he is there, and I am here: and I cannot follow him; and when will he come to me?"

The tones were lamentable. She struck her forehead, after she had mutely thrust her hand to right and left to show the space separating her from her lover.

Her voice changed when she accepted Wilfrid's adieux, to whose fate in the deadly street she appeared quite indifferent,

though she gave him one or two prudent directions, and expressed a hope that she might be of service to him.

He was set upon as soon as he emerged from the gateway; the cavalry cloak was torn from his back, and but for the chance circumstance of his swearing in English, he would have come to harm. A chill went through his blood on hearing one of his assailants speak the name of Barto Rizzo. The English oath stopped an arm that flashed a dagger half its length. Wilfrid obeyed a command to declare his name, his country, and his rank. It's not the prince! it's not the Hungarian!" went many whispers; and he was drawn away by a man who requested him to deliver his reasons for entering the palace, and who appeared satisfied by Wilfrid's ready mixture of invention and fact. But the cloak! Wilfrid stated boldly that the cloak was taken by him from the Duchess of Graatli's at Como; that he had seen a tall Hussar officer slip it off his shoulders; that he had wanted a cloak, and had appropriated it. He had entered the gate of the palace because of a woman's hand that plucked at the skirts of this very cloak.

"I saw you enter," said the man; "do that no more. We will not have the blood of Italy contaminated—do you hear? While that half-Austrian Medole is tip-toeing 'twixt Milan and Turin, we watch over his honour, to set an example to our women and your officers. You have outwitted us to-night. Off with you!"

Wilfrid was twirled and pushed through the crowd till he got free of them. He understood very well that they were

magnanimous rascals who could let an accomplice go, though they would have driven steel into the principal.

Nothing came of this adventure for some time. Wilfrid's reflections (apart from the horrible hard truth of Vittoria's marriage, against which he dashed his heart perpetually, almost asking for anguish) had leisure to examine the singularity of his feeling a commencement of pride in the clasp of his musket;—he who on the first day of his degradation had planned schemes to stick the bayonet-point between his breast-bones: he thought as well of the queer woman's way in Countess Medole's adjuration to him that he should never love a married woman;—in her speaking, as it seemed, on his behalf, when it was but an outcry of her own acute wound. Did he love a married woman? He wanted to see one married woman for the last time; to throw a frightful look on her; to be sublime in scorn of her; perhaps to love her all the better for the cruel pain, in the expectation of being consoled. While doing duty as a military machine, these were the pictures in his mind; and so well did his routine drudgery enable him to bear them, that when he heard from General Schoneck that the term of his degradation was to continue in Italy, and from his sister that General Pierson refused to speak of him or hear of him until he had regained his gold shoulder-strap, he revolted her with an ejaculation of gladness, and swore brutally that he desired to have no advancement; nothing but sleep and drill; and, he added conscientiously, Havannah cigars. "He has grown to be like a common soldier," Adela said to

herself with an amazed contemplation of the family tie. Still, she worked on his behalf, having, as every woman has, too strong an instinct as to what is natural to us to believe completely in any eccentric assertion. She carried the tale of his grief and trials and his romantic devotion to the Imperial flag, daily to Countess Lena; persisting, though she could not win a responsive look from Lena's face.

One day on the review-ground, Wilfrid beheld Prince Radocky bending from his saddle in conversation with Weisspriess. The prince galloped up to General Pierson, and stretched his hand to where Wilfrid was posted as marker to a wheeling column, kept the hand stretched out, and spoke furiously, and followed the General till he was ordered to head his regiment. Wilfrid began to hug his musket less desperately. Little presents—feminine he knew by the perfumes floating round them,—gloves and cigars, fine handkerchiefs, and silks for wear, came to his barracks. He pretended to accuse his sister of sending them. She in honest delight accused Lena. Lena then accused herself of not having done so.

It was winter: Vittoria had been seen in Milan. Both Lena and Wilfrid spontaneously guessed her to be the guilty one. He made a funeral pyre of the gifts and gave his sister the ashes, supposing that she had guessed with the same spirited intuition. It suited Adela to relate this lover's performance to Lena. "He did well!" Lena said, and kissed Adela for the first time. Adela was the bearer of friendly messages to the poor private in the ranks. From

her and from little Jenna, Wilfrid heard that he was unforgotten by Countess Lena, and new hopes mingled with gratitude caused him to regard his situation seriously. He confessed to his sister that the filthy fellows, his comrades, were all but too much for him, and asked her to kiss him, that he might feel he was not one of them. But he would not send a message in reply to Lena. "That is also well!" Lena said. Her brother Karl was a favourite with General Pierson. She proposed that Adela and herself should go to Count Karl, and urge him to use his influence with the General. This, however, Adela was disinclined to do; she could not apparently say why. When Lena went to him, she was astonished to hear that he knew every stage of her advance up to the point of pardoning her erratic lover; and even knew as much as that Wilfrid's dejected countenance on the night when Vittoria's marriage was published in the saloon of the duchess on Lake Como, had given her fresh offence. He told her that many powerful advocates were doing their best for the down-fallen officer, who, if he were shot, or killed, would still be gazetted an officer. "A nice comfort!" said Lena, and there was a rallying exchange of banter between them, out of which she drew the curious discovery that Karl had one of his strong admirations for the English lady. "Surely!" she said to herself; "I thought they were all so cold." And cold enough the English lady seemed when Lena led to the theme. "Do I admire your brother, Countess Lena? Oh! yes;—in his uniform exceedingly."

Milan was now full. Wilfrid had heard from Adela that Count

Ammiani and his bride were in the city and were strictly watched. Why did not conspirators like these two take advantage of the amnesty? Why were they not in Rome? Their Chief was in Rome; their friends were in Rome. Why were they here? A report, coming from Countess d'Isorella, said that they had quarrelled with their friends, and were living for love alone. As she visited the Lenkensteins—high Austrians—some believed her; and as Count Ammiani and his bride had visited the Duchess of Graatli, it was thought possible. Adela had refused to see Vittoria; she did not even know the house where Count Ammiani dwelt; so Wilfrid was reduced to find it for himself. Every hour when off duty the miserable sentimentalist wandered in that direction, nursing the pangs of a delicious tragedy of emotions; he was like a drunkard going to his draught. As soon as he had reached the head of the Corso, he wheeled and marched away from it with a lofty head, internally grinning at his abject folly, and marvelling at the stiff figure of an Austrian common soldier which flashed by the windows as he passed. He who can unite prudence and madness, sagacity and stupidity, is the true buffoon; nor, vindictive as were his sensations, was Wilfrid unaware of the contrast of Vittoria's soul to his own, that was now made up of antics. He could not endure the tones of cathedral music; but he had at times to kneel and listen to it, and be overcome.

On a night in the month of February, a servant out of livery addressed him at the barrack-gates, requesting him to

go at once to a certain hotel, where his sister was staying. He went, and found there, not his sister, but Countess Medole. She smiled at his confusion. Both she and the prince, she said, had spared no effort to get him reinstated in his rank; but his uncle continually opposed the endeavours of all his friends to serve him. This interview was dictated by the prince's wish, so that he might know them to be a not ungrateful couple. Wilfrid's embarrassment in standing before a lady in private soldier's uniform, enabled him with very peculiar dignity to declare that his present degradation, from the General's point of view, was a just punishment, and he did not crave to have it abated. She remarked that it must end soon. He made a dim allusion to the littleness of humanity. She laughed. "It's the language of an unfortunate lover," she said, and straightway, in some undistinguished sentence, brought the name of Countess Alessandra Ammiani tingling to his ears. She feared that she could not be of service to him there; "at least, not just yet," the lady astonished him by remarking. "I might help you to see her. If you take my advice you will wait patiently. You know us well enough to understand what patience will do. She is supposed to have married for love. Whether she did or not, you must allow a young married woman two years' grace."

The effect of speech like this, and more in a similar strain of frank corruptness, was to cleanse Wilfrid's mind, and nerve his heart, and he denied that he had any desire to meet the Countess Ammiani, unless he could perform a service that would

be agreeable to her.

The lady shrugged. "Well, that is one way. She has enemies, of course."

Wilfrid begged for their names.

"Who are they not?" she replied. "Chiefly women, it is true."

He begged most earnestly for their names; he would have pleaded eloquently, but dreaded that the intonation of one in his low garb might be taken for a whine; yet he ventured to say that if the countess did imagine herself indebted to him in a small degree, the mention of two or three of the names of Countess Alessandra Ammiani's enemies would satisfy him.

"Countess Lena von Lenkenstein, Countess Violetta d'Isorella, signorina

Irma di Karski."

She spoke the names out like a sum that she was paying down in gold pieces, and immediately rang the bell for her servant and carriage, as if she had now acquitted her debt. Wilfrid bowed himself forth. A resolution of the best kind, quite unconnected with his interests or his love, urged him on straight to the house of the Lenkensteins, where he sent up his name to Countess Lena. After a delay of many minutes, Count Lenkenstein accompanied by General Pierson came down, both evidently affecting not to see him. The General barely acknowledged his salute.

"Hey! Kinsky!" the count turned in the doorway to address him by the title of his regiment; "here; show me the house inhabited by the Countess d'Isorella during the revolt."

Wilfrid followed them to the end of the street, pointing his finger to the house, and saluted.

"An Englishman did me the favour—from pure eccentricity, of course—to save my life on that exact spot, General," said the count. "Your countrymen usually take the other side; therefore I mention it."

As Wilfrid was directing his steps to barracks (the little stir to his pride superinduced by these remarks having demoralized him), Count Lenkenstein shouted: "Are you off duty?" Wilfrid had nearly replied that he was, but just mastered himself in time. "No, indeed!" said the count, "when you have sent up your name to a lady." This time General Pierson put two fingers formally to his cap, and smiled grimly at the private's rigid figure of attention. If Wilfrid's form of pride had consented to let him take delight in the fact, he would have seen at once that prosperity was ready to shine on him. He nursed the vexations much too tenderly to give prosperity a welcome; and even when along with Lena, and convinced of her attachment, and glad of it, he persisted in driving at the subject which had brought him to her house; so that the veil of opening commonplaces, pleasant to a couple in their position, was plucked aside. His business was to ask her why she was the enemy of Countess Alessandra Ammiani, and to entreat her that she should not seek to harm that lady. He put it in a set speech. Lena felt that it ought to have come last, not in advance of their reconciliation. "I will answer you," she said. "I am not the Countess Alessandra Ammiani's enemy."

He asked her: "Could you be her friend?"

"Does a woman who has a husband want a friend?"

"I could reply, countess, in the case of a man who has a bride."

By dint of a sweet suggestion here and there, love-making crossed the topic. It appeared that General Pierson had finally been attacked, on the question of his resistance to every endeavour to restore Wilfrid to his rank, by Count Lenkenstein, and had barely spoken the words—that if Wilfrid came to Countess Lena of his own free-will, unprompted, to beg her forgiveness, he would help to reinstate him, when Wilfrid's name was brought up by the chasseur. All had laughed, "Even I," Lena confessed. And then the couple had a pleasant pettish wrangle;—he was requested to avow that he had come solely, or principally, to beg forgiveness of her, who had such heaps to forgive. No; on his honour, he had come for the purpose previously stated, and on the spur of his hearing that she was Countess Alessandra Ammiani's deadly enemy. "Could you believe that I was?" said Lena; "why should I be?" and he coloured like a lad, which sign of an ingenuousness supposed to belong to her set, made Lena bold to take the upper hand. She frankly accused herself of jealousy, though she did not say of whom. She almost admitted that when the time for reflection came, she should rejoice at his having sought her to plead for his friend rather than for her forgiveness. In the end, but with a drooping pause of her bright swift look at Wilfrid, she promised to assist him in defeating any machinations against Vittoria's

happiness, and to keep him informed of Countess d'Isorella's movements. Wilfrid noticed the withdrawing fire of the look. "By heaven! she doubts me still," he ejaculated inwardly.

These half-comic little people have their place in the history of higher natures and darker destinies. Wilfrid met Pericles, from whom he heard that Vittoria, with her husband's consent, had pledged herself to sing publicly. "It is for ze Lombard widows," Pericles apologized on her behalf; "but, do you see, I onnly want a beginning. She thaerst for ze stage; and it is, after marriage, a good sign. Oh! you shall hear, my friend; marriage have done her no hurt—ze contrary! You shall hear Hymen—Cupids—not a cold machine; it is an organ alaif! She has privily sung to her Pericles, and ser, and if I wake not very late on Judgement. Day, I shall zen hear—but why should I talk poetry to you, to make you laugh? I have a divin' passion for zat woman. Do I not give her to a husband, and say, Be happy! onnly sing! Be kissed! be hugged! onnly give Pericles your voice. By Saint Alexandre! it is to say to ze heavens, Move on your way, so long as you drop rain on us r—you smile—you look kind."

Pericles accompanied him into a caffe, the picture of an enamoured happy man. He waived aside contemptuously all mention of Vittoria's having enemies. She had them when, as a virgin, she had no sense. As a woman, she had none, for she now had sense. Had she not brought her husband to be sensible, so that they moved together in Milanese society, instead of stupidly fighting at Rome? so that what he could not take to himself—

the marvellous voice—he let bless the multitude! "She is the Beethoven of singers," Pericles concluded. Wilfrid thought so on the night when she sang to succour the Lombard widows. It was at a concert, richly thronged; ostentatiously thronged with Austrian uniforms. He fancied that he could not bear to look on her. He left the house thinking that to hear her and see her and feel that she was one upon the earth, made life less of a burden.

This evening was rendered remarkable by a man's calling out, "You are a traitress!" while Vittoria stood before the seats. She became pale, and her eyelids closed. No thinness was subsequently heard in her voice. The man was caught as he strove to burst through the crowd at the entrance-door, and proved to be a petty bookseller of Milan, by name Sarpò, known as an orderly citizen. When taken he was inflamed with liquor. Next day the man was handed from the civil to the military authorities, he having confessed to the existence of a plot in the city. Pericles came fuming to Wilfrid's quarters. Wilfrid gathered from him that Sarpò's general confession had been retracted: it was too foolish to snare the credulity of Austrian officials. Sarpò stated that he had fabricated the story of a plot, in order to escape the persecutions of a terrible man, and find safety in prison lodgings vnder Government. The short confinement for a civic offence was not his idea of safety; he desired to be sheltered by Austrian soldiers and a fortress, and said that his torments were insupportable while Barto Rizzo was at large. This infamous Republican had latterly been living in his

house, eating his bread, and threatening death to him unless he obeyed every command. Sarpo had undertaken his last mission for the purpose of supplying his lack of resolution to release himself from his horrible servitude by any other means; not from personal animosity toward the Countess Alessandra Ammiani, known as la Vittoria. When seized, fear had urged him to escape. Such was his second story. The points seemed irreconcilable to those who were not in the habit of taking human nature into their calculations of a possible course of conduct; even Wilfrid, though he was aware that Barto Rizzo hated Vittoria inveterately, imagined Sarpo's first lie to have necessarily fathered a second. But the second story was true: and the something like lover's wrath with which the outrage to Vittoria fired Pericles, prompted him to act on it as truth. He told Wilfrid that he should summon Barto Rizzo to his presence. As the Government was unable to exhibit so much power, Wilfrid looked sarcastic; whereupon Pericles threw up his chin crying: "Oh! you shall know my resources. Now, my friend, one bit of paper, and a messenger, and zen home to my house, to Tokay and cigarettes, and wait to see." He remarked after pencilling a few lines, "Countess d'Isorella is her enemy? hein!"

"Why, you wouldn't listen to me when I told you," said Wilfrid.

"No," Pericles replied while writing and humming over his pencil; "my ear is a pelican-pouch, my friend; it—and Irma is her enemy also?—it takes and keeps, but does not swallow till

it wants. I shall hear you, and I shall hear my Sandra Vittoria, and I shall not know you have spoken, when by-and-by I tinkle, tinkle, a bell of my brain, and your word walks in,— 'quite well?'—'very well! '—sit down'—'if it is ze same to you, I prefer to stand'—'good; zen I examine you.' My motto:—"Time opens ze gates: my system: 'it is your doctor of regiment's system when your twelve, fifteen, forty recruits strip to him:—"Ah! you, my man, have varicose vein: no soldier in our regiment, you!" So on. Perhaps I am not intelligible; but, hear zis. I speak not often of my money; but I say—it is in your ear—a man of millions, he is a king!" The Greek jumped up and folded a couple of notes. "I will not have her disturbed. Let her sing now and awhile to Pericles and his public: and to ze Londoners, wiz your permission, Count Ammiani, one saison. I ask no more, and I am satisfied, and I endow your oldest child, signor Conte—it is said! For its mama was a good girl, a brave girl; she troubled Pericles, because he is an intellect; but he forgives when he sees sincerity—rare zing! Sincerity and genius: it may be zey are as man and wife in a bosom. He forgives; it is not onnly voice he craves, but a soul, and Sandra, your countess, she has a soul—I am not a Turk. I say, it is a woman in whom a girl I did see a soul! A woman when she is married, she is part of ze man; but a soul, it is for ever alone, apart, confounded wiz nobody! For it I followed Sandra, your countess. It was a sublime devotion of a dog. Her voice tsrilled, her soul possessed me, Your countess is my Sandra still. I shall be pleased if child-bearing trouble her not more zan a very little;

but, enfin! she is married, and you and I, my friend Wilfrid, we must accept ze decree, and say, no harm to her out of ze way of nature, by Saint Nicolas! or any what saint you choose for your invocation. Come along. And speed my letters by one of your militaires at once off. Are Pericles' millions gold of bad mint? If so, he is an incapable. He presumes it is not so. Come along; we will drink to her in essence of Tokay. You shall witness two scenes. Away!"

Wilfrid was barely to be roused from his fit of brooding into which Pericles had thrown him. He sent the letters, and begged to be left to sleep. The image of Vittoria seen through this man's mind was new, and brought a new round of torments. "The devil take you," he cried when Pericles plucked at his arm, "I've sent the letters; isn't that enough?" He was bitterly jealous of the Greek's philosophic review of the conditions of Vittoria's marriage; for when he had come away from the concert, not a thought of her being a wife had clouded his resignation to the fact. He went with Pericles, nevertheless, and was compelled to acknowledge the kindling powers of the essence of Tokay. "Where do you get this stuff?" he asked several times. Pericles chattered of England, and Hagar's 'Addio,' and 'Camilla.' What cabinet operas would he not give! What entertainments! Could an emperor offer such festivities to his subjects? Was a Field Review equal to Vittoria's voice? He stung Wilfrid's ears by insisting on the mellowed depth, the soft human warmth, which marriage had lent to the voice. At a late hour his valet announced

Countess d'Isorella. "Did I not say so?" cried Pericles, and corrected himself: "No, I did not say so; it was a surprise to you, my friend. You shall see; you shall hear. Now you shall see what a friend Pericles can be when a person satisfy him." He pushed Wilfrid into his dressing-room, and immediately received the countess with an outburst of brutal invectives—pulling her up and down the ranked regiment of her misdeeds, as it were. She tried dignity, tried anger, she affected amazement, she petitioned for the heads of his accusations, and, as nothing stopped him, she turned to go. Pericles laughed when she had left the room. Irma di Karski was announced the next minute, and Countess d'Isorella re-appeared beside her. Irma had a similar greeting. "I am lost," she exclaimed. "Yes, you are lost," said Pericles; "a word from me, and the back of the public is humped at you—ha! contessa, you touched Mdlle. Irma's hand? She is to be on her guard, and never to think she is lost till down she goes? You are a more experienced woman! I tell you I will have no nonsense. I am Countess Alessandra Ammiani's friend. You two, you women, are her enemies. I will ruin you both. You would prevent her singing in public places—you, Countess d'Isorella, because you do not forgive her marriage to Count Ammiani; you, Irma, to spite her for her voice. You would hiss her out of hearing, you two miserable creatures. Not another soldo for you! Not one! and to-morrow, countess, I will see my lawyer. Irma, begone, and shriek to your wardrobe!"

"Countess d'Isorella, I have the extreme honour."

Wilfrid marvelled to hear this titled and lovely woman speaking almost in tones of humility in reply to such outrageous insolence. She craved a private interview. Irma was temporarily expelled, and then Violetta stooped to ask what the Greek's reason for his behaviour could be. She admitted that it was in his power to ruin her, as far as money went. "Perhaps a little farther," said Pericles; "say two steps. If one is on a precipice, two steps count for something." But, what had she done? Pericles refused to declare it. This set her guessing with a charming naivete. Pericles called Irma back to assist her in the task, and quitted them that they might consult together and hit upon the right thing. His object was to send his valet for Luigi Saracco. He had seen that no truth could be extracted from these women, save forcibly. Unaware that he had gone out, Wilfrid listened long enough to hear Irma say, between sobs: "Oh! I shall throw myself upon his mercy. Oh, Countess d'Isorella, why did you lead me to think of vengeance! I am lost! He knows everything. Oh, what is it to me whether she lives with her husband! Let them go on plotting. I am not the Government. I am sure I don't much dislike her. Yes, I hate her, but why should I hurt myself? She will wear those jewels on her forehead; she will wear that necklace with the big amethysts, and pretend she's humble because she doesn't carry earrings, when her ears have never been pierced! I am lost! Yes, you may say, lookup! I am only a poor singer, and he can ruin me. Oh! Countess d'Isorella, oh! what a fearful punishment. If Countess Anna should betray Count Ammiani to-night, nothing,

nothing, will save me. I will confess. Let us both be beforehand with her—or you, it does not matter for a noble lady."

"Hush!" said Violetta. "What dreadful fool is this I sit with? You may have done what you think of doing already."

She walked to the staircase door, and to that of the suite. An honourable sentiment, conjoined to the knowledge that he had heard sufficient, induced Wilfrid to pass on into the sleeping apartment a moment or so before Violetta took this precaution. The potent liquor of Pericles had deprived him of consecutive ideas; he sat nursing a thunder in his head, imagining it to be profound thought, till Pericles flung the door open. Violetta and Irma had departed. "Behold! I have it; ze address of your rogue Barto Rizzo," said Pericles, in the manner of one whose triumph is absolutely due to his own shrewdness. "Are two women a match for me? Now, my friend, you shall see. Barto Rizzo is too clever for zis government, which cannot catch him. I catch him, and I teach him he may touch politics—it is not for him to touch Art. What! to hound men to interrupt her while she sings in public places? What next! But I knew my Countess d'Isorella could help me, and so I sent for her to confront Irma, and dare to say she knew not Barto's dwelling—and why? I will tell you a secret. A long-flattered woman, my friend, she has had, you will think, enough of it; no! she is like avarice. If it is worship of swine, she cannot refuse it. Barto Rizzo worships her; so it is a deduction—she knows his abode—I act upon that, and I arrive at my end. I now send him to ze devil."

Barto Rizzo, after having evaded the polizia of the city during a three months' steady chase, was effectually captured on the doorstep of Vittoria's house in the Corso Francesco, by gendarmes whom Pericles had set on his track. A day later Vittoria was stabbed at about the same hour, on the same spot. A woman dealt the blow. Vittoria was returning from an afternoon drive with Laura Piaveni and the children. She saw a woman seated on the steps as beggarwomen sit, face in lap. Anxious to shield her from the lacquey, she sent the two little ones up to her with small bits of money. But, as the woman would not lift her head, she and Laura prepared to pass her, Laura coming last. The blow, like all such unexpected incidents, had the effect of lightning on those present; the woman might have escaped, but after she had struck she sat down impassive as a cat by the hearth, with a round-eyed stare.

The news that Vittoria had been assassinated traversed the city. Carlo was in Turin, Merthyr in Rome. Pericles was one of the first who reached the house; he was coming out when Wilfrid and the Duchess of Graatli drove up; and he accused the Countess d'Isorella flatly of having instigated the murder. He was frantic. They supposed that she must have succumbed to the wound. The duchess sent for Laura. There was a press of carriages and soft-humming people in the street; many women and men sobbing. Wilfrid had to wait an hour for the duchess, who brought comfort when she came. Her first words were reassuring. "Ah!" she said, "did I not do well to make you drive

here with me instead of with Lena? Those eyes of yours would be unpardonable to her. Yes, indeed; though a corpse were lying in this house; but Countess Alessandra is safe. I have seen her. I have held her hand."

Wilfrid kissed the duchess's hand passionately.

What she had said of Lena was true: Lena could only be generous upon the after-thought; and when the duchess drove Wilfrid back to her, he had to submit to hear scorn: and indignation against all Italians, who were denounced as cut-throats, and worse and worse and worse, males and females alike. This way grounded on her sympathy for Vittoria. But Wilfrid now felt toward the Italians through his remembrance of that devoted soul's love of them, and with one direct look he bade his betrothed good-bye, and they parted.

It was in the early days of March that Merthyr, then among the Republicans of Rome, heard from Laura Piaveni. Two letters reached him, one telling of the attempted assassination, and a second explaining circumstances connected with it. The first summoned him to Milan; the other left it to his option to make the journey. He started, carrying kind messages from the Chief to Vittoria, and from Luciano Ramara the offer of a renewal of old friendship to Count Ammiani. His political object was to persuade the Lombard youth to turn their whole strength upon Rome. The desire of his heart was again to see her, who had been so nearly lost to all eyes for ever.

Laura's first letter stated brief facts. "She was stabbed this

afternoon, at half-past two, on the steps of her house, by a woman called the wife of Barto Rizzo. She caught her hands up under her throat when she saw the dagger. Her right arm was penetrated just above the wrist, and half-an-inch in the left breast, close to the centre bone. She behaved firmly. The assassin only struck once. No visible danger; but you should come, if you have no serious work."

"Happily," ran the subsequent letter, of two days' later date, "the assassin was a woman, and one effort exhausts a woman; she struck only once, and became idiotic. Sandra has no fever. She had her wits ready—where were mine?—when she received the wound. While I had her in my arms, she gave orders that the woman should be driven out of the city in her carriage. The Greek, her mad musical adorer, accuses Countess d'Isorella. Carlo has seen this person—returns convinced of her innocence. That is not an accepted proof; but we have one. It seems that Rizzo (Sandra was secret about it and about one or two other things) sent to her commanding her to appoint an hour detestable style! I can see it now; I fear these conspiracies no longer:—she did appoint an hour; and was awaiting him when the gendarmes sprang on the man at her door.

"He had evaded them several weeks, so we are to fancy that his wife charged Countess Alessandra with the betrayal. This appears a reasonable and simple way of accounting for the deed. So I only partly give credit to it. But it may be true.

"The wound has not produced a shock to her system—very,

very fortunately. On the whole, a better thing could not have happened. Should I be more explicit? Yes, to you; for you are not of those who see too much in what is barely said. The wound, then, my dear good friend, has healed another wound, of which I knew nothing. Bergamasc and Brescian friends of her husband's, have imagined that she interrupted or diverted his studies. He also discovered that she had an opinion of her own, and sometimes he consulted it; but alas! they are lovers, and he knew not when love listened, or she when love spoke; and there was grave business to be done meanwhile. Can you kindly allow that the case was open to a little confusion? I know that you will. He had to hear many violent reproaches from his fellow-students. These have ceased. I send this letter on the chance of the first being lost on the road; and it will supplement the first pleasantly to you in any event. She lies here in the room where I write, propped on high pillows, the right arm bound up, and says: 'Tell Merthyr I prayed to be in Rome with my husband, and him, and the Chief. Tell him I love my friend. Tell him I think he deserves to be in Rome. Tell him—' Enter Countess Ammiani to reprove her for endangering the hopes of the house by fatiguing herself. Sandra sends a blush at me, and I smile, and the countess kisses her. I send you a literal transcript of one short scene, so that you may feel at home with us.

"There is a place called Venice, and there is a place called Rome, and both places are pretty places and famous places; and there is a thing called the fashion; and these pretty places and

famous places set the fashion: and there is a place called Milan, and a place called Bergamo, and a place called Brescia, and they all want to follow the fashion, for they are giddy-pated baggages. What is the fashion, mama? The fashion, my dear, is &c. &c. &c.:—Extract of lecture to my little daughter, Amalia, who says she forgets you; but Giacomo sends his manly love. Oh, good God! should I have blood in my lips when I kissed him, if I knew that he was old enough to go out with a sword in his hand a week hence? I seem every day to be growing more and more all mother. This month in front of us is full of thunder. Addio!"

When Merthyr stood in sight of Milan an army was issuing from the gates.

CHAPTER XLI

THE INTERVIEW

Merthyr saw Laura first. He thought that Vittoria must be lying on her couch: but Laura simply figured her arm in a sling, and signified, more than said, that Vittoria was well and taking the air. She then begged hungrily for news of Rome, and again of Rome, and sat with her hands clasped in her lap to listen. She mentioned Venice in a short breath of praise, as if her spirit could not repose there. Rome, its hospitals, its municipal arrangements, the names of the triumvirs, the prospects of the city, the edicts, the aspects of the streets, the popularity of the Government, the number of volunteers ranked under the magical Republic—of these things Merthyr talked, at her continual instigation, till, stopping abruptly, he asked her if she wished to divert him from any painful subject. "No, no!" she cried, "it's only that I want to feel an anchor. We are all adrift. Sandra is in perfect health. Our bodies, dear Merthyr, are enjoying the perfection of comfort. Nothing is done here except to keep us from boiling over."

"Why does not Count Ammiani come to Rome?" said Merthyr.

"Why are we not all in Rome? Yes, why! why! We should make a carnival of our own if we were."

"She would have escaped that horrible knife," Merthyr sighed.

"Yes, she would have escaped that horrible knife. But see the difference between Milan and Rome, my friend! It was a blessed knife here. It has given her husband back to her; it has destroyed the intrigues against her. It seems to have been sent—I was kneeling in the cathedral this morning, and had the very image crossing my eyes—from the saints of heaven to cut the black knot. Perhaps it may be the means of sending us to Rome."

Laura paused, and, looking at him, said, "It is so utterly impossible for us women to comprehend love without folly in a man; the trait by which we recognize it! Merthyr, you dear Englishman, you shall know everything. Do we not think a tisane a weak washy drink, when we are strong? But we learn, when we lie with our chins up, and our ten toes like stopped organ-pipes—as Sandra says—we learn then that it means fresh health and activity, and is better than rivers of your fiery wines. You love her, do you not?"

The question came with great simplicity.

"If I can give a proof of it, I am ready to answer," said Merthyr, in some surprise.

"Your whole life is the proof of it. The women of your country are intolerable to me, Merthyr: but I do see the worth of the men. Sandra has taught me. She can think of you, talk of you, kiss the vision of you, and still be a faithful woman in our bondage of flesh; and to us you know what a bondage it is: How can that be? I should have asked, if I had not seen it. Dearest, she loves her husband, and she loves you. She has two husbands, and

she turns to the husband of her spirit when that, or any, dagger strikes her bosom. Carlo has an unripe mind. They have been married but a little more than four months; and he reveres her and loves her." . . . Laura's voice dragged. "Multiply the months by thousands, we shall not make those two lives one. It is the curse of man's education in Italy? He can see that she has wits and courage. He will not consent to make use of them. You know her: she is not one to talk of these things. She, who has both heart and judgement—she is merely a little boat tied to a big ship. Such is their marriage. She cannot influence him. She is not allowed to advise him. And she is the one who should lead the way. And—if she did, we should now be within sight of the City."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.