

**GEORGE  
MEREDITH**

VITTORIA,  
VOLUME 2

**George Meredith**  
**Vittoria. Volume 2**

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*Vittoria – Volume 2:*

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# George Meredith

## Vittoria – Volume 2

### CHAPTER IX IN VERONA

The lieutenant read these lines, as he clattered through the quiet streets toward the Porta Tosa:

'DEAR FRIEND,—I am glad that you remind me of our old affection, for it assures me that yours is not dead. I cannot consent to see you yet. I would rather that we should not meet.

'I thought I would sign my name here, and say, "God bless you, Wilfrid; go!"

'Oh! why have you done this thing! I must write on. It seems like my past life laughing at me, that my old friend should have come here in Italy, to wear the detestable uniform. How can we be friends when we must act as enemies? We shall soon be in arms, one against the other. I pity you, for you have chosen a falling side; and when you are beaten back, you can have no pride in your country, as we Italians have; no delight, no love. They will call you a mercenary soldier. I remember that I used to have the fear of your joining our enemies, when we were in England, but it seemed too much for my reason.

'You are with a band of butchers. If I could see you and tell you the story of Giacomo Piaveni, and some other things, I believe you would break your sword instantly.

'There is time. Come to Milan on the fifteenth. You will see me then. I appear at La Scala. Promise me, if you hear me, that you will do exactly what I make you feel it right to do. Ah, you will not, though thousands will! But step aside to me, when the curtain falls, and remain—oh, dear friend! I write in honour to you; we have sworn to free the city and the country—remain among us: break your sword, tear off your uniform; we are so strong that we are irresistible. I know what a hero you can be on the field: then, why not in the true cause? I do not understand that you should waste your bravery under that ugly flag, bloody and past forgiveness.

'I shall be glad to have news of you all, and of England. The bearer of this is a trusty messenger, and will continue to call at the hotel. A. is offended that I do not allow my messenger to give my address; but I must not only be hidden, I must have peace, and forget you all until I have done my task. Addio. We have both changed names. I am the same. Can I think that you are? Addio, dear friend.

**'VITTORIA.'**

Lieutenant Pierson read again and again the letter of her whom he had loved in England, to get new lights from it, as lovers do when they have lost the power to take single impressions. He was the bearer of a verbal despatch from the commandant in

Milan to the Marshal in Verona. At that period great favour was shown to Englishmen in the Austrian service, and the lieutenant's uncle being a General of distinction, he had a sort of semi-attachment to the Marshal's staff, and was hurried to and fro, for the purpose of keeping him out of duelling scrapes, as many of his friendlier comrades surmised. The right to the distinction of exercising staff-duties is, of course, only to be gained by stout competitorship in the Austrian service; but favour may do something for a young man even in that rigorous school of Arms. He had to turn to Brescia on his way, and calculated that if luck should put good horses under him, he would enter Verona gates about sunset. Meantime; there was Vittoria's letter to occupy him as he went.

We will leave him to his bronzing ride through the mulberries and the grapes, and the white and yellow and arid hues of the September plain, and make acquaintance with some of his comrades of that proud army which Vittoria thought would stand feebly against the pouring tide of Italian patriotism.

The fairest of the cities of the plain had long been a nest of foreign soldiery. The life of its beauty was not more visible then than now. Within the walls there are glimpses of it, that belong rather to the haunting spirit than to the life. Military science has made a mailed giant of Verona, and a silent one, save upon occasion. Its face grins of war, like a skeleton of death; the salient image of the skull and congregating worms was one that Italian lyrists applied naturally to Verona.

The old Field-Marshal and chief commander of the Austrian forces in Lombardy, prompted by the counsels of his sagacious adlatus, the chief of the staff, was engaged at that period in adding some of those ugly round walls and flanking bastions to Verona, upon which, when Austria was thrown back by the first outburst of the insurrection and the advance of the Piedmontese, she was enabled to plant a sturdy hind-foot, daring her foes as from a rock of defence.

A group of officers, of the cavalry, with a few infantry uniforms skirting them, were sitting in the pleasant cooling evening air, fanned by the fresh springing breeze, outside one of the Piazza Bra cafes, close upon the shadow of the great Verona amphitheatre. They were smoking their attenuated long straw cigars, sipping iced lemonade or coffee, and talking the common talk of the garrison officers, with perhaps that additional savour of a robust immorality which a Viennese social education may give. The rounded ball of the brilliant September moon hung still aloft, lighting a fathomless sky as well as the fair earth. It threw solid blackness from the old savage walls almost to a junction with their indolent outstretched feet. Itinerant street music twittered along the Piazza; officers walked arm-in-arm; now in moonlight bright as day, now in a shadow black as night: distant figures twinkled with the alternation. The light lay like a blade's sharp edge around the massive circle. Of Italians of a superior rank, Verona sent none to this resort. Even the melon-seller stopped beneath the arch ending the Stradone Porta Nuova,

as if he had reached a marked limit of his popular customers.

This isolation of the rulers of Lombardy had commenced in Milan, but, owing to particular causes, was not positively defined there as it was in Verona. War was already raging between the Veronese ladies and the officers of Austria. According to the Gallic Terpsichorean code, a lady who permits herself to make election of her partners and to reject applicants to the honour of her hand in the dance, when that hand is disengaged, has no just ground of complaint if a glove should smite her cheek. The Austrians had to endure this sort of rejection in Ballrooms. On the promenade their features were forgotten. They bowed to statues. Now, the officers of Austria who do not belong to a Croat regiment, or to one drawn from any point of the extreme East of the empire, are commonly gentlemanly men; and though they can be vindictive after much irritation, they may claim at least as good a reputation for forbearance in a conquered country as our officers in India. They are not ill-humoured, and they are not peevishly arrogant, except upon provocation. The conduct of the tender Italian dames was vexatious. It was exasperating to these knights of the slumbering sword to hear their native waltzes sounding of exquisite Vienna, while their legs stretched in melancholy inactivity on the Piazza pavement, and their arms encircled no ductile waists. They tried to despise it more than they disliked it, called their female foes Amazons, and their male by a less complimentary title, and so waited for the patriotic epidemic to pass.

A certain Captain Weisspriess, of the regiment named after a sagacious monarch whose crown was the sole flourishing blossom of diplomacy, particularly distinguished himself by insisting that a lady should remember him in public places. He was famous for skill with his weapons. He waltzed admirably; erect as under his Field-Marshal's eye. In the language of his brother officers, he was successful; that is, even as God Mars when Bellona does not rage. Captain Weisspriess (Johann Nepomuk, Freiherr von Scheppenhause) resembled in appearance one in the Imperial Royal service, a gambling General of Division, for whom Fame had not yet blown her blast. Rumour declared that they might be relatives; a little-scrupulous society did not hesitate to mention how. The captain's moustache was straw-coloured; he wore it beyond the regulation length and caressed it infinitely. Surmounted by a pair of hot eyes, wavering in their direction, this grand moustache was a feature to be forgotten with difficulty, and Weisspriess was doubtless correct in asserting that his face had endured a slight equal to a buffet. He stood high and square-shouldered; the flame of the moustache streamed on either side his face in a splendid curve; his vigilant head was loftily posted to detect what he chose to construe as insult, or gather the smiles of approbation, to which, owing to the unerring judgement of the sex, he was more accustomed. Handsome or not, he enjoyed the privileges of masculine beauty.

This captain of a renown to come pretended that a superb Venetian lady of the Branciani family was bound to make

response in public to his private signals, and publicly to reply to his salutations. He refused to be as a particle in space floating airily before her invincible aspect. Meeting her one evening, ere sweet Italy had exiled herself from the Piazza, he bowed, and stepping to the front of her, bowed pointedly. She crossed her arms and gazed over him. He called up a thing to her recollection in resonant speech. Shameful lie, or shameful truth, it was uttered in the hearing of many of his brother officers, of three Italian ladies, and of an Italian gentleman, Count Broncini, attending them. The lady listened calmly. Count Broncini smote him on the face. That evening the lady's brother arrived from Venice, and claimed his right to defend her. Captain Weisspriess ran him through the body, and attached a sinister label to his corpse. This he did not so much from brutality; the man felt that henceforth while he held his life he was at war with every Italian gentleman of mettle. Count Broncini was his next victim. There, for a time, the slaughtering business of the captain stopped. His brother officers of the better kind would not have excused him at another season, but the avenger of their irritation and fine vindicator of the merits of Austrian steel, had a welcome truly warm, when at the termination of his second duel he strode into mess, or what serves for an Austrian regimental mess.

It ensued naturally that there was everywhere in Verona a sharp division between the Italians of all classes and their conquerors. The great green-rinded melons were never wheeled into the neighbourhood of the whitecoats. Damsels were no

longer coquettish under the military glance, but hurried by in couples; and there was much scowling mixed with derisive servility, throughout the city, hard to be endured without that hostile state of the spirit which is the military mind's refuge in such cases. Itinerant musicians, and none but this fry, continued to be attentive to the dispensers of soldi.

The Austrian army prides itself upon being a brotherhood. Discipline is very strict, but all commissioned officers, when off duty, are as free in their intercourse as big boys. The General accepts a cigar from the lieutenant, and in return lifts his glass to him. The General takes an interest in his lieutenant's love-affairs: nor is the latter shy when he feels it his duty modestly to compliment his superior officer upon a recent conquest. There is really good fellowship both among the officers and in the ranks, and it is systematically encouraged.

The army of Austria was in those days the Austrian Empire. Outside the army the empire was a jealous congery of intriguing disaffected nationalities. The same policy which played the various States against one another in order to reduce all to subserviency to the central Head, erected a privileged force wherein the sentiment of union was fostered till it became a nationality of the sword. Nothing more fatal can be done for a country; but for an army it is a simple measure of wisdom. Where the password is MARCH, and not DEVELOP, a body of men, to be a serviceable instrument, must consent to act as one. Hannibal is the historic example of what a General

can accomplish with tribes who are thus, enrolled in a new citizenship; and (as far as we know of him and his fortunes) he appears to be an example of the necessity of the fusing fire of action to congregated aliens in arms. When Austria was fighting year after year, and being worsted in campaign after campaign, she lost foot by foot, but she held together soundly; and more than the baptism, the atmosphere of strife has always been required to give her a healthy vitality as a centralized empire. She knew it; this (apart from the famous promptitude of the Hapsburgs) was one secret of her dauntless readiness to fight. War did the work of a smithy for the iron and steel holding her together; and but that war costs money, she would have been an empire distinguished by aggressiveness. The next best medicinal thing to war is the military occupation of insurgent provinces. The soldiery soon feel where their home is, and feel the pride of atomies in unitive power, when they are sneered at, hooted, pelted, stabbed upon a gross misinterpretation of the slightest of moral offences, shamefully abused for doing their duty with a considerate sense of it, and too accurately divided from the inhabitants of the land they hold. In Italy, the German, the Czech, the Magyar, the Croft, even in general instances the Italian, clung to the standard for safety, for pay, for glory, and all became pre-eminently Austrian soldiers; little besides.

It was against a power thus bound in iron hoops, that Italy, dismembered, and jealous, and corrupt, with an organization promoted by passion chiefly, was preparing to rise. In the end, a

country true to itself and determined to claim God's gift to brave men will overmatch a mere army, however solid its force. But an inspired energy of faith is demanded of it. The intervening chapters will show pitiable weakness, and such a schooling of disaster as makes men, looking on the surface of things, deem the struggle folly. As well, they might say, let yonder scuffling vagabonds up any of the Veronese side-streets fall upon the patrol marching like one man, and hope to overcome them! In Vienna there was often despair: but it never existed in the Austrian camp. Vienna was frequently double-dealing and time-serving her force in arms was like a trained man feeling his muscle. Thus, when the Government thought of temporizing, they issued orders to Generals whose one idea was to strike the blow of a mallet.

At this period there was no suspicion of any grand revolt being in process of development. The abounding dissatisfaction was treated as nothing more than the Italian disease showing symptoms here and there, and Vienna counselled measures mildly repressive,—'conciliating,' it was her pleasure to call them. Her recent commands with respect to turbulent Venice were the subject of criticism among the circle outside the Piazza Gaffe. An enforced inactivity of the military legs will quicken the military wits, it would appear, for some of the younger officers spoke hotly as to their notion of the method of ruling Venezia. One had bidden his Herr General to 'look here,' while he stretched forth his hand and declared that Italians were like women, and wanted—yes, wanted—(their instinct called

for it) a beating, a real beating; as the emphatic would say in our vernacular, a thundering thrashing, once a month:—'Or so,' the General added acquiescingly. A thundering thrashing, once a month or so, to these unruly Italians, because they are like women! It was a youth who spoke, but none doubted his acquaintance with women, or cared to suggest that his education in that department of knowledge was an insufficient guarantee for his fitness to govern Venezia. Two young dragoon officers had approached during the fervid allocution, and after the salute to their superior, caught up chairs and stamped them down, thereupon calling for the loan of anybody's cigar-case. Where it is that an Austrian officer ordinarily keeps this instrument so necessary to his comfort, and obnoxious, one would suppose, to the rigid correctness of his shapely costume, we cannot easily guess. None can tell even where he stows away his pocket-handkerchief, or haply his purse. However, these things appear on demand. Several elongated cigar-cases were thrust forward, and then it was seen that the attire of the gallant youngsters was in disorder.

'Did you hunt her to earth?' they were asked.

The reply trenched on philosophy; and consisted in an inquiry as to who cared for the whole basketful—of the like description of damsels, being implied. Immoderate and uproarious laughter burst around them. Both seemed to have been clawed impartially. Their tightfitting coats bulged at the breast or opened at the waist, as though buttons were lacking, and the whiteness of that

garment cried aloud for the purification of pipeclay. Questions flew. The damsel who had been pursued was known as a pretty girl, the daughter of a blacksmith, and no prolonged resistance was expected from one of her class. But, as it came out, she had said, a week past, 'I shall be stabbed if I am seen talking to you', and therefore the odd matter was, not that she had, in tripping down the Piazza with her rogue-eyed cousin from Milan, looked away and declined all invitation to moderate her pace and to converse, but that, after doubling down and about lonely streets, the length of which she ran as swiftly as her feet would carry her, at a corner of the Via Colomba she allowed herself to be caught—wilfully, beyond a doubt, seeing that she was not a bit breathed—allowed one quick taste of her lips, and then shrieked as naturally as a netted bird, and brought a hustling crowd just at that particular point to her rescue: not less than fifty, and all men. 'Not a woman among them!' the excited young officer repeated.

A veteran in similar affairs could see that he had the wish to remain undisturbed in his bewilderment at the damsel's conduct. Profound belief in her partiality for him perplexed his recent experience rather agreeably. Indeed, it was at this epoch an article of faith with the Austrian military that nothing save terror of their males kept sweet Italian women from the expression of their preference for the broad-shouldered, thick-limbed, yellow-haired warriors—the contrast to themselves which is supposed greatly to inspirit genial Cupid in the selection from his quiver.

'What became of her? Did you let her go?' came pestering

remarks, too absurd for replies if they had not been so persistent.

'Let her go? In the devil's name, how was I to keep my hold of her in a crowd of fifty of the fellows, all mowing, and hustling, and elbowing— every rascal stinking right under my nose like the pit?'

"Hem!" went the General present. 'As long as you did not draw!

Unsheathe, a minute.'

He motioned for a sight of their naked swords.

The couple of young officers flushed.

'Herr General! Pardon!' they remonstrated.

'No, no. I know how boys talk; I've been one myself. Tutt! You tell the truth, of course; but the business is for me to know in what! how far! Your swords, gentlemen.'

'But, General!'

'Well? I merely wish to examine the blades.'

'Do you doubt our words?'

'Hark at them! Words? Are you lawyers? A soldier deals in acts. I don't want to know your words, but your deeds, my gallant lads. I want to look at the blades of your swords, my children. What was the last order? That on no account were we to provoke, or, if possibly to be avoided, accept a collision, etc., etc. The soldier in peace is a citizen, etc. No sword on any account, or for any excuse, to be drawn, etc. You all heard it? So, good! I receive your denial, my children. In addition, I merely desire to satisfy curiosity. Did the guard clear a way for you?'

The answer was affirmative.

'Your swords!'

One of them drew, and proffered the handle.

The other clasped the haft angrily, and with a resolute smack on it, settled it in the scabbard.

'Am I a prisoner, General?'

'Not at all!'

'Then I decline to surrender my sword.'

Another General officer happened to be sauntering by. Applauding with his hands, and choosing the Italian language as the best form of speech for the enunciation of ironical superlatives, he said:

'Eccellentemente! most admirable! of a distinguished loftiness of moral grandeur: "Then I decline," etc.: you are aware that you are quoting? "as the drummerboy said to Napoleon." I think you forgot to add that? It is the same young soldier who utters these immense things, which we can hardly get out of our mouths. So the little fellow towers! His moral greatness is as noisy as his drum. What's wrong?'

'General Pierson, nothing's wrong,' was replied by several voices; and some explained that Lieutenant Jenna had been called upon by General Schoneck to show his sword, and had refused.

The heroic defender of his sword shouted to the officer with whom General

Pierson had been conversing: 'Here! Weisspriess!'

'What is it, my dear fellow? Speak, my good Jenna!'

The explanation was given, and full sympathy elicited from Captain

Weisspriess, while the two Generals likewise whispered and nodded.

'Did you draw?' the captain inquired, yawning. 'You needn't say it in quite so many words, if you did. I shall be asked by the General presently; and owing to that duel pending 'twixt you and his nephew, of which he is aware, he may put a bad interpretation on your pepperiness.'

'The devil fetch his nephew!' returned the furious Lieutenant Jenna. 'He comes back to-night from Milan, and if he doesn't fight me to-morrow, I post him a coward. Well, about that business! My good Weisspriess, the fellows had got into a thick crowd all round, and had begun to knead me. Do you understand me? I felt their knuckles.'

'Ah, good, good!' said the captain. 'Then, you didn't draw, of course. What officer of the Imperial service would, under similar circumstances! That is my reply to the Emperor, if ever I am questioned. To draw would be to show that an Austrian officer relies on his good sword in the thick of his enemies; against which, as you know, my Jenna, the Government have issued an express injunction button. Did you sell it dear?'

'A fellow parted with his ear for it.'

Lieutenant Jenna illustrated a particular cut from a turn of his wrist.

'That oughtn't to make a noise?' he queried somewhat

anxiously.

'It won't hear one any longer, at all events,' said Captain Weisspriess; and the two officers entered into the significance of the remark with enjoyment.

Meantime General Pierson had concluded an apparently humorous dialogue with his brother General, and the later, now addressing Lieutenant Jenna, said: 'Since you prefer surrendering your person rather than your sword— it is good! Report yourself at the door of my room to-night, at ten. I suspect that you have been blazing your steel, sir. They say, 'tis as ready to flash out as your temper.'

Several voices interposed: 'General! what if he did draw!'

'Silence. You have read the recent order. Orlando may have his Durindarda bare; but you may not. Grasp that fact. The Government wish to make Christians of you, my children. One cheek being smitten, what should you do?'

'Shall I show you, General?' cried a quick little subaltern.

'The order, my children, as received a fortnight since from our old Wien, commands you to offer the other cheek to the smiter.'

'So that a proper balance may be restored to both sides of the face,'

General Pierson appended.

'And mark me,' he resumed. 'There may be doubts about the policy of anything, though I shouldn't counsel you to cherish them: but there's no mortal doubt about the punishment for this thing.' The General spoke sternly; and then relaxing the severity

of his tone, he said, 'The desire of the Government is to make an army of Christians.'

'And a precious way of doing it!' interjected two or three of the younger officers. They perfectly understood how hateful the Viennese domination was to their chiefs, and that they would meet sympathy and tolerance for any extreme of irony, provided that they showed a disposition to be subordinate. For the bureaucratic order, whatever it was, had to be obeyed. The army might, and of course did, know best: nevertheless it was bound to be nothing better than a machine in the hands of the dull closeted men in Vienna, who judged of difficulties and plans of action from a calculation of numbers, or from foreign journals—from heaven knows what!

General Schoneck and General Pierson walked away laughing, and the younger officers were left to themselves. Half-a-dozen of them interlaced arms, striding up toward the Porta Nuova, near which, at the corner of the Via Trinita, they had the pleasant excitement of beholding a riderless horse suddenly in mid gallop sink on its knees and roll over. A crowd came pouring after it, and from the midst the voice of a comrade hailed them. 'It's Pierson,' cried Lieutenant Jenna. The officers drew their swords, and hailed the guard from the gates. Lieutenant Pierson dropped in among their shoulders, dead from want of breath. They held him up, and finding him sound, thumped his back. The blade of his sword was red. He coughed with their thumpings, and sang out to them to cease; the idle mob which had been at his heels

drew back before the guard could come up with them. Lieutenant Pierson gave no explanation except that he had been attacked near Juliet's tomb on his way to General Schoneck's quarters. Fellows had stabbed his horse, and brought him to the ground, and torn the coat off his back. He complained in bitter mutterings of the loss of a letter therein, during the first candid moments of his anger: and, as he was known to be engaged to the Countess Lena von Lenkenstein, it was conjectured by his comrades that this lady might have had something to do with the ravishment of the letter. Great laughter surrounded him, and he looked from man to man. Allowance is naturally made for the irascibility of a brother officer coming tattered out of the hands of enemies, or Lieutenant Jenna would have construed his eye's challenge on the spot. As it was, he cried out, 'The letter! the letter! Charge, for the honour of the army, and rescue the letter!' Others echoed him: 'The letter! the letter! the English letter!' A foreigner in an army can have as much provocation as he pleases; if he is anything of a favourite with his superiors, his fellows will task his forbearance. Wilfrid Pierson glanced at the blade of his sword, and slowly sheathed it. 'Lieutenant Jenna is a good actor before a mob,' he said. 'Gentlemen, I rely upon you to make no noise about that letter; it is a private matter. In an hour or so, if any officer shall choose to question me concerning it, I will answer him.'

The last remnants of the mob had withdrawn. The officer in command at the gates threw a cloak over Wilfrid's shoulders; and taking the arm of a friend Wilfrid hurried to barracks, and

was quickly in a position to report himself to his General, whose first remark, 'Has the dead horse been removed?' robbed him of his usual readiness to equivocate. 'When you are the bearer of a verbal despatch, come straight to quarters, if you have to come like a fig-tree on the north side of the wall in Winter,' said General Schoneck, who was joined presently by General Pierson.

'What 's this I hear of some letter you have been barking about all over the city?' the latter asked, after returning his nephew's on-duty salute.

Wilfrid replied that it was a letter of his sister's treating of family matters.

The two Generals, who were close friends, discussed the attack to which he had been subjected. Wilfrid had to recount it with circumstance: how, as he was nearing General Schoneck's quarters at a military trot, six men headed by a leader had dashed out on him from a narrow side-street, unhorsed him after a struggle, rifled the saddlebags, and torn the coat from his back, and had taken the mark of his sword, while a gathering crowd looked on, hooting. His horse had fled, and he confessed that he had followed his horse. General Schoneck spoke the name of Countess Lena suggestively. 'Not a bit,' returned General Pierson; 'the fellow courts her too hotly. The scoundrels here want a bombardment; that 's where it lies. A dose of iron pills will make Verona a healthy place. She must have it.'

General Schoneck said, 'I hope not,' and laughed at the heat of Irish blood. He led Wilfrid in to the Marshal, after which Wilfrid

was free to seek Lieutenant Jenna, who had gained the right to a similar freedom by pledging his honour not to fight within a stipulated term of days. The next morning Wilfrid was roused by an orderly coming from his uncle, who placed in his hands a copy of Vittoria's letter: at the end of it his uncle had written, 'Rather astonishing. Done pretty well; but by a foreigner. "Affection" spelt with one "f." An Italian: you will see the letters are emphatic at "ugly flag"; also "bloody and past forgiveness" very large; the copyist had a dash of the feelings of a commentator, and did his (or her) best to add an oath to it. Who the deuce, sir, is this opera girl calling herself Vittoria? I have a lecture for you. German women don't forgive diversions during courtship; and if you let this Countess Lena slip, your chance has gone. I compliment you on your power of lying; but you must learn to show your right face to me, or the very handsome feature, your nose, and that useful box, your skull, will come to grief. The whole business is a mystery. The letter (copy) was directed to you, brought to me, and opened in a fit of abstraction, necessary to commanding uncles who are trying to push the fortunes of young noodles pretending to be related to them. Go to Countess Lena. Count Paul is with her, from Bologna. Speak to her, and observe her and him. He knows English—has been attached to the embassy in London; but, pooh! the hand's Italian. I confess myself puzzled. We shall possibly have to act on the intimation of the fifteenth, and profess to be wiser than others. Something is brewing for business. See Countess Lena boldly, and then come and breakfast

with me.'

Wilfrid read the miserable copy of Vittoria's letter, utterly unable to resolve anything in his mind, except that he would know among a thousand the leader of those men who had attacked him, and who bore the mark of his sword.

# CHAPTER X

## THE POPE'S MOUTH

Barto Rizzo had done what he had sworn to do. He had not found it difficult to outstrip the lieutenant (who had to visit Brescia on his way) and reach the gates of Verona in advance of him, where he obtained entrance among a body of grape-gatherers and others descending from the hills to meet a press of labour in the autumnal plains. With them he hoped to issue forth unchallenged on the following morning; but Wilfrid's sword had made lusty play; and, as in the case when the order has been given that a man shall be spared in life and limb, Barto and his fellow-assailants suffered by their effort to hold him simply half a minute powerless. He received a shrewd cut across the head, and lay for a couple of hours senseless in the wine-shop of one Battista—one of the many all over Lombardy who had pledged their allegiance to the Great Cat, thinking him scarcely vulnerable. He read the letter, dizzy with pain, and with the frankness proper to inflated spirits after loss of blood, he owned to himself that it was not worth much as a prize. It was worth the attempt to get possession of it, for anything is worth what it costs, if it be only as a schooling in resolution, energy, and devotedness:—regrets are the sole admission of a fruitless business; they show the bad tree;—so, according to his

principle of action, he deliberated; but he was compelled to admit that Vittoria's letter was little else than a repetition of her want of discretion when she was on the Motterone. He admitted it, wrathfully: his efforts to convict this woman telling him she deserved some punishment; and his suspicions being unsatisfied, he resolved to keep them hungry upon her, and return to Milan at once. As to the letter itself, he purposed, since the harm in it was accomplished, to send it back honourably to the lieutenant, till finding it blood- stained, he declined to furnish the gratification of such a sight to any Austrian sword. For that reason, he copied it, while Battista's wife held double bandages tight round his head: believing that the letter stood transcribed in a precisely similar hand, he forwarded it to Lieutenant Pierson, and then sank and swooned. Two days he lay incapable and let his thoughts dance as they would. Information was brought to him that the gates were strictly watched, and that troops were starting for Milan. This was in the dull hour antecedent to the dawn. 'She is a traitress!' he exclaimed, and leaping from his bed, as with a brain striking fire, screamed, 'Traitor! traitress!' Battista and his wife had to fling themselves on him and gag him, guessing him as mad. He spoke pompously and theatrically; called himself the Eye of Italy, and said that he must be in Milan, or Milan would perish, because of the traitress: all with a great sullen air of composure and an odd distension of the eyelids. When they released him, he smiled and thanked them, though they knew, that had he chosen, he could have thrown off a dozen of them,

such was his strength. The woman went down on her knees to him to get his consent that she should dress and bandage his head afresh. The sound of the regimental bugles drew him from the house, rather than any immediate settled scheme to watch at the gates.

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