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Title: Vittoria, v5

Author: George Meredith

Release Date: September, 2003 [Etext #4439]
[Yes, we are more than one year ahead of schedule]
[This file was first posted on January 24, 2002]

Edition: 10

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

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VITTORIA

By George Meredith

CONTENTS:

BOOK 5.

XXVI. THE DUEL IN THE PASS

XXVII. A NEW ORDEAL

XXVIII. THE ESCAPE OF ANGELO

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 Guidascari, 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 whether 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 Guidascarpì, 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 Guidascarpì, 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!'

A vision of leaping tumbrils, and long marching columns about to deploy, passed before his eyelids: he thought he had fallen on the battle-field, and heard a drum beat furiously in the back of his head; and on streamed the cavalry, wonderfully caught away to such a distance that the figures were all diminutive, and the regimental colours swam in smoke, and the enemy danced a plume here and there out of the sea, while his mother and a forgotten Viennese girl gazed at him with exactly the same unfamiliar countenance, and refused to hear that they were unintelligible in the roaring of guns and floods and hurrahs, and the thumping of the tremendous big drum behind his head--'somewhere in the middle of the earth': he tried to explain the locality of that terrible drumming noise to them, and Vittoria conceived him to be delirious; but he knew that he was sensible; he knew her and Angelo and the mountain-pass, and that he had a cigar-case in his pocket worked in embroidery of crimson, blue, and gold, by the hands of Countess Anna. He said distinctly that he desired the cigar-case to be delivered to Countess Anna at the Castle of Sonnenberg, and rejoiced on being assured that his wish was comprehended and should be fulfilled; but the marvel was, that his mother should still refuse to give him wine, and suppose him to be a boy: and when he was so thirsty and dry-lipped that though Mina was bending over him, just fresh from Mariazell, he had not the heart to kiss her or lift an arm to her!-- His horse was off with him--whither?--He was going down with a company of infantry in the Gulf of Venice: cards were in his hands, visible, though he could not feel them, and as the vessel settled for the black plunge, the cards flushed all honours, and his mother shook her head at him: he sank, and heard Mina sighing all the length of the water to the bottom, which grated and gave him two horrid shocks of pain: and he cried for a doctor, and admitted that his horse had managed to throw him; but wine was the cure, brandy was the cure, or water, water! Water was sprinkled on his forehead and put to his lips.

He thanked Vittoria by name, and imagined himself that General, serving under old Wurmser, of whom the tale is told that being shot and lying grievously wounded on the harsh Rivoli ground, he obtained the help of a French officer in as bad case as himself, to moisten his black tongue and write a short testamentary document with his blood, and for a way of returning thanks to the Frenchman, he put down among others, the name of his friendly enemy's widow; whereupon both resigned their hearts to death; but the Austrian survived to find the sad widow and espouse her.

His mutterings were full of gratitude, showing a vividly transient impression to what was about him, that vanished in a narrow-headed flight through clouds into lands of memory. It pained him, he said, that he

could not offer her marriage; but he requested that when his chin was shaved his moustache should be brushed up out of the way of the clippers, for he and all his family were conspicuous for the immense amount of life which they had in them, and his father had lain six-and-thirty hours bleeding on the field of Wagram, and had yet survived to beget a race as hearty as himself:--'Old Austria! thou grand old Austria!'

The smile was proud, though faint, which accompanied the apostrophe, addressed either to his country or to his father's personification of it; it was inexpressibly pathetic to Vittoria, who understood his 'Oesterreich,' and saw the weak and helpless bleeding man, with his eyeballs working under the lids, and the palms of his hands stretched out open-weak as a corpse, but conquering death.

The arrival of Jacopo and Johann furnished help to carry him onward to the nearest place of shelter. Angelo would not quit her side until he had given money and directions to both the trembling fellows, together with his name, that they might declare the author of the deed at once if questioned. He then bowed to Vittoria slightly and fled. They did not speak.

The last sunbeams burned full crimson on the heights of the Adige mountains as Vittoria followed the two pale men who bore the wounded officer between them at a slow pace for the nearest village in the descent of the pass.

Angelo watched them out of sight. The far-off red rocks spun round his eyeballs; the meadow was a whirling thread of green; the brown earth heaved up to him. He felt that he was diving, and had the thought that there was but water enough to moisten his red hands when his senses left him.

CHAPTER XXVII

A NEW ORDEAL

The old city of Meran faces Southward to the yellow hills of Italy, across a broad vale, between two mountain-walls and torrent-waters. With one hand it takes the bounding green Passeyr, and with the other the brown-rolling Adige, and plunges them together in roaring foam under the shadow of the Western wall. It stands on the spur of a lower central eminence crowned by a grey castle, and the sun has it from every aspect. The shape of a swan in water may describe its position, for the Vintschgau and the stony Passeyrthal make a strong curve on two sides as they descend upon it with their rivers, and the bosom of the city projects, while the head appears bending gracefully backward. Many castles are in view of it; the loud and tameless Passeyr girdles it with an emerald cincture; there is a sea of arched vineyard foliage at his feet.

Vittoria reached the Castle of Sonnenberg about noon, and found empty courts and open doors. She sat in the hall like a supplicant, disregarded by the German domestics, who beheld a travel-stained humble-faced young Italian woman, and supposed that their duty was done in permitting her to rest; but the duchess's maid Aennchen happening to come by, questioned her in moderately intelligible Italian, and hearing her name gave a cry, and said that all the company were out hunting, shooting, and riding, in the vale below or the mountain above. "Ah, dearest lady, what a fright we have all been in about you! Signora Piaveni has not slept a wink, and the English gentleman has made great excursions every day to find you. This morning the soldier Wilhelm arrived with news that his master was bringing you on."

Vittoria heard that Laura and her sister and the duchess had gone down to Meran. Countess Lena von Lenkenstein was riding to see her betrothed shoot on a neighbouring estate. Countess Anna had disappeared early, none knew where. Both these ladies, and their sister-in-law, were in mourning for the terrible death of their brother, Count Paul Aennchen repeated what she knew of the tale concerning him.

The desire to see Laura first, and be embraced and counselled by her, and lie awhile in her arms to get a breath of home, made Vittoria refuse to go up to her chamber, and notwithstanding Aennchen's persuasions, she left the castle, and went out and sat in the shaded cart-track. On the winding ascent she saw a lady in a black riding habit, leading her horse and talking to a soldier, who seemed to be receiving orders from her, and presently saluted and turned his steps downward. The lady came on, and passed her without a glance. After entering the courtyard, where she left her horse, she reappeared, and stood hesitating, but came up to Vittoria and said bluntly, in Italian:

"Are you the signorina Campa, or Belloni, who is expected here?"

The Austrian character and colouring of her features told Vittoria that this must be the Countess Anna or her sister.

"I think I have been expected," she replied.

"You come alone?"

"I am alone."

"I am Countess Anna von Lenkenstein; one of the guests of the castle."

"My message is to the Countess Anna."

"You have a message?"

Vittoria lifted the embroidered cigar-case. Countess Anna snatched it from her hand.

"What does this mean? Is it insolence? Have the kindness, if you please, not to address me in enigmas. Do you"--Anna was deadly pale as

she turned the cigarcase from side to side--"do you imagine that I smoke, 'par hasard?'" She tried to laugh off her intemperate manner of speech; the laugh broke at sight of a blood-mark on one corner of the case; she started and said earnestly, "I beg you to let me hear what the meaning of this may be?"

"He lies in the Ultenthal, wounded; and his wish was that I should deliver it to you." Vittoria spoke as gently as the harsh tidings would allow.

"Wounded? My God! my God!" Anna cried in her own language. "Wounded?-in the breast, then! He carried it in his breast. Wounded by what? by what?"

"I can tell you no more."

"Wounded by whom?"

"It was an honourable duel."

"Are you afraid to tell me he has been assassinated?"

"It was an honourable duel."

"None could match him with the sword."

"His enemy had nothing but a dagger."

"Who was his enemy?"

"It is no secret, but I must leave him to say."

"You were a witness of the fight?"

"I saw it all."

"The man was one of your party!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Vittoria, "lose no time with me, Countess Anna, go to him at once, for though he lived when I left him, he was bleeding; I cannot say that he was not dying, and he has not a friend near."

Anna murmured like one overborne by calamity. "My brother struck down one day--he the next!" She covered her face a moment, and unclosed it to explain that she wept for her brother, who had been murdered, stabbed in Bologna.

"Was it Count Ammiani who did this?" she asked passionately.

Vittoria shook her head; she was divining a dreadful thing in relation to the death of Count Paul.

"It was not?" said Anna. "They had a misunderstanding, I know. But you

tell me the man fought with a dagger. It could not be Count Ammiani. The dagger is an assassin's weapon, and there are men of honour in Italy still."

She called to a servant in the castle-yard, and sent him down with orders to stop the soldier Wilhelm.

"We heard this morning that you were coming, and we thought it curious," she observed; and called again for her horse to be saddled. "How far is this place where he is lying? I have no knowledge of the Ultenthal. Has he a doctor attending him? When was he wounded? It is but common humanity to see that he is attended by an efficient doctor. My nerves are unstrung by the recent blow to our family; that is why--Oh, my father! my holy father!" she turned to a grey priest's head that was rising up the ascent, "I thank God for you! Lena is away riding; she weeps constantly when she is within four walls. Come in and give me tears, if you can; I am half mad for the want of them. Tears first; teach me patience after."

The old priest fanned his face with his curled hat, and raised one hand as he uttered a gentle chiding in reproof of curbless human sorrow. Anna said to Vittoria, coldly, "I thank you for your message:" she walked into the castle by his side, and said to him there: "The woman you saw outside has a guilty conscience. You will spend your time more profitably with her than with me. I am past all religious duties at this moment. You know, father, that I can open my heart. Probe this Italian woman; search her through and through. I believe her to be blood-stained and abominable. She hates us. She has sworn an oath against us. She is malignant."

It was not long before Anna issued forth and rode down to the vale. The priest beckoned to Vittoria from the gates. He really supposed her to have come to him with a burdened spirit.

"My daughter," he addressed her. The chapter on human error was opened: "We are all of one family--all of us erring children--all of us bound to abnegate hatred: by love alone are we saved. Behold the Image of Love--the Virgin and Child. Alas! and has it been visible to man these more than eighteen hundred years, and humankind are still blind to it? Are their ways the ways of comfort and blessedness? Their ways are the ways of blood; paths to eternal misery among howling fiends. Why have they not chosen the sweet ways of peace, which are strewn with flowers, which flow with milk?"--The priest spread his hand open for Vittoria's, which she gave to his keeping, and he enclosed it softly, smoothing it with his palms, and retaining it as a worldly oyster between spiritual shells. "Why, my daughter, why, but because we do not bow to that Image daily, nightly, hourly, momentarily! We do not worship it that its seed may be sown in us. We do not cling to it, that in return it may cling to us."

He spoke with that sensuous resource of rich feeling which the contemplation of the Image does inspire. And Vittoria was not led reluctantly into the oratory of the castle to pray with him; but she refused to confess. Thereupon followed a soft discussion that was as

near being acerb as nails are near velvet paws.

Vittoria perceived his drift, and also the dear good heart of the old man, who meant no harm to her, and believed that he was making use of his professional weapons for her ultimate good. The inquisitions and the kindness went musically together; she responded to the kindness, but rebutted the inquisitions; at which he permitted a shade of discontent to traverse his features, and asked her with immense tenderness whether she had not much on her mind; she expressing melodious gratitude for his endeavours to give her comfort. He could not forbear directing an admonishment to her stubborn spirit, and was obliged, for the sake of impressiveness, to speak it harshly; until he saw, that without sweetness of manner and unction of speech, he left her untouched; so he was driven back to the form of address better suited to his nature and habits; the end of which was that both were cooing.

Vittoria was ashamed to tell herself how much she liked him and his ghostly brethren, whose preaching was always of peace, while the world was full of lurid hatred, strife, and division. She begged the baffled old man to keep her hand in his. He talked in Latinized Italian, and only appeared to miss the exact meaning of her replies when his examination of the state of her soul was resumed. They sat in the soft colour of the consecrated place like two who were shut away from earth. Often he thought that her tears were about to start and bring her low; for she sighed heavily; at the mere indication of the displacement of her hand, she looked at him eagerly, as if entreating him not to let it drop.

"You are a German, father?" she said.

"I am of German birth, my daughter."

"That makes it better. Remain beside me. The silence is sweet music."

The silence was broken at intervals by his murmur of a call for patience! patience!

This strange scene concluded with the entry of the duchess, who retired partly as soon as she saw them. Vittoria smiled to the old man, and left him: the duchess gave her a hushed welcome, and took her place. Vittoria was soon in Laura's arms, where, after a storm of grief, she related the events of the journey following her flight from Milan. Laura interrupted her but once to exclaim, "Angelo Guidascarp!" Vittoria then heard from her briefly that Milan was quiet, Carlo Ammiani in prison. It had been for tidings of her lover that she had hastened over the mountains to Meran. She craved for all that could be told of him, but Laura repeated, as in a stupefaction, "Angelo Guidascarp!" She answered Vittoria's question by saying, "You could not have had so fatal a companion."

"I could not have had so devoted a protector."

"There is such a thing as an evil star. We are all under it at present, to some degree; but he has been under it from his birth. My Sandra, my beloved, I think I have pardoned you, if I ever pardon anyone! I doubt

it; but it is certain that I love you. You have seen Countess Anna, or I would have told you to rest and get over your fatigue. The Lenkensteins are here--my poor sister among them. You must show yourself. I was provident enough to call at your mother's for a box of your clothes before I ran out of wretched Milan."

Further, the signora stated that Carlo might have to remain in prison. She made no attempt to give dark or fair colour to the misery of the situation; telling Vittoria to lie on her bed and sleep, if sleep could be persuaded to visit her, she went out to consult with the duchess. Vittoria lay like a dead body on the bed, counting the throbs of her heart. It helped her to fall into a state of insensibility. When she awoke, the room was dark; she felt that some one had put a silken cushion across her limbs. The noise of a storm traversing the vale rang through the castle, and in the desolation of her soul, that stealthy act of kindness wrought in her till she almost fashioned a vow upon her lips that she would leave the world to toss its wrecks, and dedicate her life to God.

For, O heaven! of what avail is human effort? She thought of the Chief, whose life was stainless, but who stood proscribed because his aim was too high to be attained within compass of a mortal's years. His error seemed that he had ever aimed at all. He seemed less wise than the old priest of the oratory. She could not disentangle him from her own profound humiliation and sense of fallen power. Her lover's imprisonment accused her of some monstrous culpability, which she felt unrepentingly, not as we feel a truth, but as we submit to a terrible force of pressure.

The morning light made her realize Carlo's fate, to whom it would penetrate through a hideous barred loophole--a defaced and dreadful beam. She asked herself why she had fled from Milan. It must have been some cowardly instinct that had prompted her to fly. "Coward, coward! thing of vanity! you, a mere woman!" she cried out, and succeeded in despising herself sufficiently to think it possible that she had deserved to forfeit her lover's esteem.

It was still early when the duchess's maid came to her, bringing word that her mistress would be glad to visit her. From the duchess Vittoria heard of the charge against Angelo. Respecting Captain Weisspriess, Amalia said that she had perceived his object in wishing to bring the great cantatrice to the castle; and that it was a well-devised audacious scheme to subdue Countess Anna:--"We Austrians also can be jealous. The difference between us is, that it makes us tender, and you Italians savage." She asked pointedly for an affirmative, that Vittoria was glad to reply with, when she said: "Captain Weisspriess was perfectly respectful to you?" She spoke comforting words of Carlo Ammiani, whom she hoped to see released as soon as the excitement had subsided. The chief comfort she gave was by saying that he had been originally arrested in mistake for his cousin Angelo.

"I will confide what is now my difficulty here frankly to you," said the duchess. "The Lenkensteins are my guests; I thought it better to bring them here. Angelo Guidascarpi has slain their brother--a base deed!

It does not affect you in my eyes; you can understand that in theirs it does. Your being present--Laura has told me everything--at the duel, or fight, between that young man and Captain Weisspriess, will make you appear as his accomplice--at least, to Anna it will; she is the most unreasoning, the most implacable of women. She returned from the Ultenthal last night, and goes there this morning, which is a sign that Captain Weisspriess lives. I should be sorry if we lost so good an officer. As she is going to take Father Bernardus with her, it is possible that the wound is serious. Do you know you have mystified the worthy man exceedingly? What tempted you to inform him that your conscience was heavily burdened, at the same time that you refused to confess?"

"Surely he has been deluded about me," said Vittoria.

"I do but tell you his state of mind in regard to you," the duchess pursued. "Under all the circumstances, this is what I have to ask: you are my Laura's guest, therefore the guest of my heart. There is another one here, an Englishman, a Mr. Powys; and also Lieutenant Pierson, whom, naughty rebel that you are, you have been the means of bringing into disgrace; naturally you would wish to see them: but my request is, that you should keep to these rooms for two or three days: the Lenkensteins will then be gone. They can hardly reproach me for retaining an invalid. If you go down among them, it will be a cruel meeting."

Vittoria thankfully consented to the arrangement. They agreed to act in accordance with it.

The signora was a late riser. The duchess had come on a second visit to Vittoria when Laura joined them, and hearing of the arrangement, spurned the notion of playing craven before the Lenkensteins, who, she said, might think as it pleased them to think, but were never to suppose that there was any fear of confronting them. "And now, at this very moment, when they have their triumph, and are laughing over Viennese squibs at her, she has an idea of hiding her head--she hangs out the white flag! It can't be. We go or we stay; but if we stay, the truth is that we are too poor to allow our enemies to think poorly of us. You, Amalia, are victorious, and you may snap your fingers at opinion. It is a luxury we cannot afford. Besides, I wish her to see my sister and make acquaintance with the Austrianized-Italian--such a wonder as is nowhere to be seen out of the Serabiglione and in the Lenkenstein family. Marriage is, indeed, a tremendous transformation. Bianca was once declared to be very like me."

The brow-beaten duchess replied to the outburst that she had considered it right to propose the scheme for Vittoria's seclusion on account of the Guidascapi.

"Even if that were a good reason, there are better on the other side," said Laura; adding, with many little backward tosses of the head, "That story has to be related in full before I denounce Angelo and Rinaldo."

"It cannot be denied that they are assassins," returned the duchess.

"It cannot be denied that they have killed one man or more. For you, Justice drops from the bough: we have to climb and risk our necks for it. Angelo stood to defend my darling here. Shall she be ashamed of him?"

"You will never persuade me to tolerate assassination," said the duchess colouring.

"Never, never; I shall never persuade you; never persuade--never attempt to persuade any foreigner that we can be driven to extremes where their laws do not apply to us--are not good for us--goad a subjected people till their madness is pardonable. Nor shall I dream of persuading you that Angelo did right in defending her from that man."

"I maintain that there are laws applicable to all human creatures," said the duchess. "You astonish me when you speak compassionately of such a criminal."

"No; not of such a criminal, of such an unfortunate youth, and my countryman, when every hand is turned against him, and all tongues are reviling him. But let Angelo pass; I pray to heaven he may escape. All who are worth anything in our country are strained in every fibre, and it's my trick to be half in love with anyone of them when he is persecuted. I fancy he is worth more than the others, and is simply luckless. You must make allowances for us, Amalia--pity captive Judah!"

"I think, my Laura, you will never be satisfied till I have ceased to be Babylonian," said the duchess, smiling and fondling Vittoria, to whom she said, "Am I not a complaisant German?"

Vittoria replied gently, "If they were like you!"

"Yes, if they were like the duchess," said Laura, "nothing would be left for us then but to hate ourselves. Fortunately, we deal with brutes."

She was quite pitiless in prompting Vittoria to hasten down, and marvelled at the evident reluctance in doing this slight duty, of one whose courage she had recently seen rise so high. Vittoria was equally amazed by her want of sympathy, which was positive coldness, and her disregard for the sentiments of her hostess. She dressed hesitatingly, responding with forlorn eyes to Laura's imperious "Come." When at last she was ready to descend, Laura took her dawn, full of battle. The duchess had gone in advance to keep the peace.

The ladies of the Lenkenstein family were standing at one window of the morning room conversing. Apart from them, Merthyr Powys and Wilfrid were examining one of the cumbrous antique arms ranged along the wall. The former of these old English friends stepped up to Vittoria quickly and kissed her forehead. Wilfrid hung behind him; he made a poor show of indifference, stammered English and reddened; remembering that he was under observation he recovered wonderfully, and asked, like a patron, "How is the voice?" which would have been foolish enough to Vittoria's more attentive hearing. She thanked him for the service he had rendered

her at La Scala. Countess Lena, who looked hard at both, saw nothing to waken one jealous throb.

"Bianca, you expressed a wish to give a salute to my eldest daughter," said Laura.

The Countess of Lenkenstein turned her head. "Have I done so?"

"It is my duty to introduce her," interposed the duchess, and conducted the ceremony with a show of its embracing these ladies, neither one of whom changed her cold gaze.

Careful that no pause should follow, she commenced chatting to the ladies and gentlemen alternately, keeping Vittoria under her peculiar charge. Merthyr alone seconded her efforts to weave the web of converse, which is an armistice if not a treaty on these occasions.

"Have you any fresh caricatures from Vienna?" Laura continued to address her sister.

"None have reached me," said the neutral countess.

"Have they finished laughing?"

"I cannot tell."

"At any rate, we sing still," Laura smiled to Vittoria. "You shall hear us after breakfast. I regret excessively that you were not in Milan on the Fifteenth. We will make amends to you as much as possible. You shall hear us after breakfast. You will sing to please my sister, Sandra mia, will you not?"

Vittoria shook her head. Like those who have become passive, she read faces--the duchess's imploring looks thrown from time to time to the Lenkenstein ladies, Wilfrid's oppressed forehead, the resolute neutrality of the countess--and she was not only incapable of seconding Laura's aggressive war, but shrank from the involvement and sickened at the indelicacy. Anna's eyes were fixed on her and filled her with dread lest she should be resolving to demand a private interview.

"You refuse to sing?" said Laura; and under her breath, "When I bid you not, you insist!"

"Can she possibly sing before she grows accustomed to the air of the place?" said the duchess.

Merthyr gravely prescribed a week's diet on grapes antecedent to the issuing of a note. "Have you never heard what a sustained grape-diet will do for the bullfinches?"

"Never," exclaimed the duchess. "Is that the secret of their German education?"

"Apparently, for we cannot raise them to the same pitch of perfection in England."

"I will try it upon mine. Every morning they shall have two big bunches."

"Fresh plucked, and with the first sunlight on them. Be careful of the rules."

Wilfrid remarked, "To make them exhibit the results, you withdraw the benefit suddenly, of course?"

"We imitate the general run of Fortune's gifts as much as we can," said Merthyr.

"That is the training for little shrill parrots: we have none in Italy," Laura sighed, mock dolefully; "I fear the system would fail among us."

"It certainly would not build Como villas," said Lena.

Laura cast sharp eyes on her pretty face.

"It is adapted for caged voices that are required to chirrup to tickle the ears of boors."

Anna said to the duchess: "I hope your little birds are all well this morning."

"Come to them presently with me and let our ears be tickled," the duchess laughed in answer; and the spiked dialogue broke, not to revive.

The duchess had observed the constant direction of Anna's eyes upon Vittoria during the repast, and looked an interrogation at Anna, who replied to it firmly. "I must be present," the duchess whispered. She drew Vittoria away by the hand, telling Merthyr Powys that it was unkind to him, but that he should be permitted to claim his fair friend from noon to the dinner-bell.

Laura and Bianca were discussing the same subject as the one for which Anna desired an interview with Vittoria. It was to know the conditions and cause of the duel between Angelo Guidascarpi and Captain Weisspriess, and whither Angelo had fled. "In other words, you cry for vengeance under the name of justice," Laura phrased it, and put up a prayer for Angelo's escape.

The countess rebuked her. "It is men like Angelo who are a scandal to Italy."

"Proclaimed so; but by what title are they judged?" Laura retorted. "I have heard that his duel with Count Paul was fair, and that the grounds for it were just. Deplore it; but to condemn an Italian gentleman without hearing his personal vindication, is infamous; nay, it is Austrian. I know next to nothing of the story. Countess Ammiani has

assured me that the brothers have a clear defence--not from your Vienna point of view: Italy and Vienna are different sides of the shield."

Vittoria spoke most humbly before Anna; her sole irritating remark was, that even if she were aware of the direction of Angelo's flight, she would not betray him.

The duchess did her utmost to induce her to see that he was a criminal, outlawed from common charity. "These Italians are really like the Jews," she said to Anna; "they appear to me to hold together by a bond of race: you cannot get them to understand that any act can be infamous when one of their blood is guilty of it."

Anna thought gloomily: "Then, why do you ally yourself to them?"

The duchess, with Anna, Lena, and Wilfrid, drove to the Ultenthal. Vittoria and Merthyr had a long afternoon of companionship. She had been shyer in meeting him than in meeting Wilfrid, whom she had once loved. The tie between herself and Wilfrid was broken; but Merthyr had remained true to his passionless affection, which ennobled him to her so that her heart fluttered, though she was heavily depressed. He relieved her by letting her perceive that Carlo Ammiani's merits were not unknown to him. Merthyr smiled at Carlo for abjuring his patrician birth. He said: "Count Ammiani will be cured in time of those little roughnesses of his adopted Republicanism. You must help to cure him. Women are never so foolish as men in these things."

When Merthyr had spoken thus, she felt that she might dare to press his hand. Sharing friendship with this steadfast nature and brotherly gentleman; who was in the ripe manhood of his years; who loved Italy and never despaired; who gave great affection, and took uncomplainingly the possible return for it;--seemed like entering on a great plain open to boundless heaven. She thought that friendship was sweeter than love. Merthyr soon left the castle to meet his sister at Coire. Laura and Vittoria drove some distance up the Vintschgau, on the way to the Engadine, with him. He affected not to be downcast by the failure of the last attempt at a rising in Milan. "Keep true to your Art; and don't let it be subservient to anything," he said, and his final injunction to her was that she should get a German master and practise rigidly.

Vittoria could only look at Laura in reply.

"He is for us, but not of us," said Laura, as she kissed her fingers to him.

"If he had told me to weep and pray," Vittoria murmured, "I think I should by-and-by lift up my head."

"By-and-by! By-and-by I think I see a convent for me," said Laura.

Their faces drooped.

Vittoria cried: "Ah! did he mean that my singing at La Scala was below

the mark?"

At this, Laura's laughter came out in a volume. "And that excellent Father Bernardus thinks he is gaining a convert!" she said.

Vittoria's depression was real, though her strong vitality appeared to mock it. Letters from Milan, enclosed to the duchess, spoke of Carlo Ammiani's imprisonment as a matter that might be indefinitely prolonged. His mother had been subjected to an examination; she had not hesitated to confess that she had received her nephew in her house, but it could not be established against her that it was not Carlo whom she had passed off to the sbirri as her son. Countess Ammiani wrote to Laura, telling her she scarcely hoped that Carlo would obtain his liberty save upon the arrest of Angelo:--"Therefore, what I most desire, I dare not pray for!" That line of intense tragic grief haunted Vittoria like a veiled head thrusting itself across the sunlight. Countess Ammiani added that she must give her son what news she could gather;--"Concerning you," said Laura, interpreting the sentence: "Bitter days do this good, they make a proud woman abjure the traditions of her caste." A guarded answer was addressed, according to the countess's directions, to Sarpo the bookseller, in Milan. For purposes of such a nature, Barto Rizzo turned the uneasy craven to account.

It happened that one of the maids at Sonnenberg was about to marry a peasant, of Meran, part proprietor of a vineyard, and the nuptials were to be celebrated at the castle. Among those who thronged the courtyard on the afternoon of the ceremony, Vittoria beheld her faithful Beppo, who related the story of his pursuit of her, and the perfidy of Luigi;--a story so lengthy, that his voluble tongue running at full speed could barely give the outlines of it. He informed her, likewise, that he had been sent for, while lying in Trent, by Captain Weisspriess, whom he had seen at an inn of the Ultenthal, weak but improving. Beppo was the captain's propitiatory offering to Vittoria. Meanwhile the ladies sat on a terrace, overlooking the court, where a stout fellow in broad green braces and blue breeches lay half across a wooden table, thrumming a zither, which set the groups in motion. The zither is a melancholy little instrument; in range of expression it is to the harp what the winchat is to the thrush; or to the violin, what that bird is to the nightingale; yet few instruments are so exciting: here and there along these mountain valleys you may hear a Tyrolese maid set her voice to its plaintive thin tones; but when the strings are swept madly there is mad dancing; it catches at the nerves. "Andreas! Andreas!" the dancers shouted to encourage the player. Some danced with vine-poles; partners broke and wandered at will, taking fresh partners, and occasionally huddling in confusion, when the poles were levelled and tilted at them, and they dispersed. Beppo, dancing mightily to recover the use of his legs, met his acquaintance Jacob Baumwalder Feckelwitz, and the pair devoted themselves to a rivalry of capers; jump, stamp, shuffle, leg aloft, arms in air, yell and shriek: all took hands around them and streamed, tramping the measure, and the vine-poles guarded the ring. Then Andreas raised the song: "Our Lady is gracious," and immediately the whole assemblage were singing praise to the Lady of the castle. Following which, wine being brought to Andreas, he drank to his lady,

to his lady's guests, to the bride, to the, bridegroom, to everybody. He was now ready to improvise, and dashed thumb and finger on the zither, tossing up his face, swarthy-flushed: "There was a steinbock with a beard." Half-a-dozen voices repeated it, as to proclaim the theme.

Alas! a beard indeed, for there is no end to this animal. I know him," said the duchess dolefully.

"There was a steinbock with a beard;
Of no gun was he afeard
Piff-paff left of him: piff-paff right of him
Piff-paff everywhere, where you get a sight of him."

The steinbock led through the whole course of a mountaineer's emotions and experiences, with piff-paff continually left of him and right of him and nothing hitting him. The mountaineer is perplexed; an able man, a dead shot, who must undo the puzzle or lose faith in his skill, is a tremendous pursuer, and the mountaineer follows the steinbock ever. A 'sennderin' at a 'sennhutchin' tells him that she admitted the steinbock last night, and her curled hair frizzled under the steinbock's eyes. The case is only too clear: my goodness! the steinbock is the----. "Der Teu . . . !" said Andreas, with a comic stop of horror, the rhyme falling cleverly to "ai." Henceforth the mountaineer becomes transformed into a champion of humanity, hunting the wicked bearded steinbock in all corners; especially through the cabinet of those dark men who decree the taxes detested in Tyrol.

The song had as yet but fairly commenced, when a break in the 'piff-paff' chorus warned Andreas that he was losing influence, women and men were handing on a paper and bending their heads over it; their responses hushed altogether, or were ludicrously inefficient.

"I really believe the poor brute has come to a Christian finish--this Ahasuerus of steinbocks!" said the duchess.

The transition to silence was so extraordinary and abrupt, that she called to her chasseur to know the meaning of it. Feckelwitz fetched the paper and handed it up. It exhibited a cross done in blood under the word 'Meran,' and bearing that day's date. One glance at it told Laura what it meant. The bride in the court below was shedding tears: the bridegroom was lighting his pipe and consoling her; women were chattering, men shrugging. Some said they had seen an old grey-haired hag (hexe) stand at the gates and fling down a piece of paper. A little boy whose imagination was alive with the tale of the steinbock, declared that her face was awful, and that she had only the, use of one foot. A man patted him on the shoulder, and gave him a gulp of wine, saying with his shrewdest air: "One may laugh at the devil once too often, though!" and that sentiment was echoed; the women suggested in addition the possibility of the bride Lisa having something on her conscience, seeing that she had lived in a castle two years and more. The potential persuasions of Father Bernardus were required to get the bride to go away to her husband's roof that evening: when she did make her departure, the superstitious peasantry were not a merry party that followed at her

heels.

At the break-up of the festivities Wilfrid received an intimation that his sister had arrived in Meran from Bormio. He went down to see her, and returned at a late hour. The ladies had gone to rest. He wrote a few underlined words, entreating Vittoria to grant an immediate interview in the library of the castle. The missive was entrusted to Aennchen. Vittoria came in alarm.

"My sister is perfectly well," said Wilfrid. "She has heard that Captain Gambier has been arrested in the mountains; she had some fears concerning you, which I quieted. What I have to tell you, does not relate to her. The man Angelo Guidascarpì is in Meran. I wish you to let the signora know that if he is not carried out of the city before sunset to-morrow, I must positively inform the superior officer of the district of his presence there."

This was their first private interview. Vittoria (for she knew him) had acceded to it, much fearing that it would lead to her having to put on her sex's armour. To collect her wits, she asked tremblingly how Wilfrid had chanced to see Angelo. An old Italian woman, he said, had accosted him at the foot of the mountain, and hearing that he was truly an Englishman--"I am out of my uniform," Wilfrid remarked with intentional bitterness--had conducted him to the house of an Italian in the city, where Angelo Guidascarpì was lying.

"Ill?" said Vittoria.

"Just recovering. After that duel, or whatever it may be called with Weisspriess, he lay all night out on the mountains. He managed to get the help of a couple of fellows, who led him at dusk into Meran, saw an Italian name over a shop, and--I will say for them that the rascals hold together. There he is, at all events."

"Would you denounce a sick man, Wilfrid?"

"I certainly cannot forget my duty upon every point"

"You are changed!"

"Changed! Am I the only one who is changed?"

"He must have supposed that it would be Merthyr. I remember speaking of Merthyr to him as our unchangeable friend. I told him Merthyr would be here."

"Instead of Merthyr, he had the misfortune to see your changeable friend, if you will have it so."

"But how can it be your duty to denounce him, Wilfrid. You have quitted that army."

"Have I? I have forfeited my rank, perhaps."

"And Angelo is not guilty of a military offence."

"He has slain one of a family that I am bound to respect."

"Certainly, certainly," said Vittoria hurriedly.

Her forehead showed distress of mind; she wanted Laura's counsel.

"Wilfrid, do you know the whole story?"

"I know that he inveigled Count Paul to his house and slew him; either he or his brother, or both."

"I have been with him for days, Wilfrid. I believe that he would do no dishonourable thing. He is related----".

"He is the cousin of Count Ammiani."

"Ah! would you plunge us in misery?"

"How?"

"Count Ammiani is my lover."

She uttered it unblushingly, and with tender eyes fixed on him.

"Your lover!" he exclaimed, with vile emphasis.

"He will be my husband," she murmured, while the mounting hot colour burned at her temples.

"Changed--who is changed?" he said, in a vehement underneath. "For that reason I am to be false to her who does me the honour to care for me!"

"I would not have you false to her in thought or deed."

"You ask me to spare this man on account of his relationship to your lover, and though he has murdered the brother of the lady whom I esteem. What on earth is the meaning of the petition? Really, you amaze me."

"I appeal to your generosity, Wilfrid, I am Emilia."

"Are you?"

She gave him her hand. He took it, and felt at once the limit of all that he might claim. Dropping the hand, he said:

"Will nothing less than my ruin satisfy you? Since that night at La Scala, I am in disgrace with my uncle; I expect at any moment to hear that I am cashiered from the army, if not a prisoner. What is it that you ask of me now? To conspire with you in shielding the man who has done a mortal injury to the family of which I am almost one. Your reason

must perceive that you ask too much. I would willingly assist you in sparing the feelings of Count Ammiani; and, believe me, gratitude is the last thing I require to stimulate my services. You ask too much; you must see that you ask too much."

"I do," said Vittoria. "Good-night, Wilfrid."

He was startled to find her going, and lost his equable voice in trying to detain her. She sought relief in Laura's bosom, to whom she recapitulated the interview.

"Is it possible," Laura said, looking at her intently, "that you do not recognize the folly of telling this Lieutenant Pierson that you were pleading to him on behalf of your lover? Could anything be so monstrous, when one can see that he is malleable to the twist of your little finger? Are you only half a woman, that you have no consciousness of your power? Probably you can allow yourself--enviable privilege!--to suppose that he called you down at this late hour simply to inform you that he is compelled to do something which will cause you unhappiness! I repeat, it is an enviable privilege. Now, when the real occasion has come for you to serve us, you have not a single weapon--except these tears, which you are wasting on my lap. Be sure that if he denounces Angelo, Angelo's life cries out against you. You have but to quicken your brain to save him. Did he expose his life for you or not? I knew that he was in Meran," the signora continued sadly. "The paper which frightened the silly peasants, revealed to me that he was there, needing help. I told you Angelo was under an evil star. I thought my day to-morrow would be a day of scheming. The task has become easy, if you will."

"Be merciful; the task is dreadful," said Vittoria.

"The task is simple. You have an instrument ready to your hands. You can do just what you like with him--make an Italian of him; make him renounce his engagement to this pert little Lena of Lenkenstein, break his sword, play Arlecchino, do what you please. He is not required for any outrageous performance. A week, and Angelo will have recovered his strength; you likewise may resume the statuesque demeanour which you have been exhibiting here. For the space of one week you are asked for some natural exercise of your wits and compliancy. Hitherto what have you accomplished, pray?" Laura struck spitefully at Vittoria's degraded estimation of her worth as measured by events. "You have done nothing--worse than nothing. It gives me horrors to find it necessary to entreat you to look your duty in the face and do it, that even three or four Italian hearts--Carlo among them--may thank you. Not Carlo, you say?" (Vittoria had sobbed, "No, not Carlo.") "How little you know men! How little do you think how the obligations of the hour should affect a creature deserving life! Do you fancy that Carlo wishes you to be for ever reading the line of a copy-book and shaping your conduct by it? Our Italian girls do this; he despises them. Listen to me; do not I know what is meant by the truth of love? I pass through fire, and keep constant to it; but you have some vile Romance of Chivalry in your head; a modern sculptor's figure, 'MEDITATION;' that is the sort of bride you would give him in the stirring days of Italy. Do you think it is only a

statue that can be true? Perceive--will you not--that this Lieutenant Pierson is your enemy. He tells you as much; surely the challenge is fair? Defeat him as you best can. Angelo shall not be abandoned."

"O me! it is unendurable; you are merciless," said Vittoria, shuddering.

She saw the vile figure of herself aping smirks and tender meanings to her old lover. It was a picture that she dared not let her mind rest on: how then could she personate it? All through her life she had been frank; as a young woman, she was clear of soul; she felt that her, simplicity was already soiled by the bare comprehension of the abominable course indicated by Laura. Degradation seemed to have been a thing up to this moment only dreamed of; but now that it was demanded of her to play coquette and trick her womanhood with false allurements, she knew the sentiment of utter ruin; she was ashamed. No word is more lightly spoken than shame. Vittoria's early devotion to her Art, and subsequently to her Italy, had carried her through the term when she would otherwise have showed the natural mild attack of the disease. It came on her now in a rush, penetrating every chamber of her heart, overwhelming her; she could see no distinction between being ever so little false and altogether despicable. She had loathings of her body and her life. With grovelling difficulty of speech she endeavoured to convey the sense of her repugnance to Laura, who leaned her ear, wondering at such bluntness of wit in a woman, and said, "Are you quite deficient in the craft of your sex, child? You can, and you will, guard yourself ten times better when your aim is simply to subject him." But this was not reason to a spirit writhing in the serpent-coil of fiery blushes.

Vittoria said, "I shall pity him so."

She meant she would pity Wilfrid in deluding him. It was a taint of the hypocrisy which comes with shame.

The signora retorted: "I can't follow the action of your mind a bit."

Pity being a form of tenderness, Laura supposed that she would intuitively hate the man who compelled her to do what she abhorred.

They spent the greater portion of the night in this debate.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE ESCAPE OF ANGELO

Vittoria knew better than Laura that the task was easy; she had but to override her aversion to the show of trifling with a dead passion; and when she thought of Angelo lying helpless in the swarm of enemies, and that Wilfrid could consent to use his tragic advantage to force her to silly love-play, his selfishness wrought its reflection, so that she became sufficiently unjust to forget her marvellous personal influence

over him. Even her tenacious sentiment concerning his white uniform was clouded. She very soon ceased to be shamefaced in her own fancy. At dawn she stood at her window looking across the valley of Meran, and felt the whole scene in a song of her heart, with the faintest recollection of her having passed through a tempest overnight. The warm Southern glow of the enfoliated valley recalled her living Italy, and Italy her voice. She grew wakefully glad: it was her nature, not her mind, that had twisted in the convulsions of last night's horror of shame. The chirp of healthy blood in full-flowing veins dispersed it; and as a tropical atmosphere is cleared by the hurricane, she lost her depression and went down among her enemies possessed by an inner delight, that was again of her nature, not of her mind. She took her gladness for a happy sign that she had power to rise buoyant above circumstances; and though aware that she was getting to see things in harsh outlines, she was unconscious of her haggard imagination.

The Lenkensteins had projected to escape the blandishments of Vienna by residing during the winter in Venice, where Wilfrid and his sister were to be the guests of the countess:--a pleasant prospect that was dashed out by an official visit from Colonel Zofel of the Meran garrison, through whom it was known that Lieutenant Pierson, while enjoying his full liberty to investigate the charms of the neighbourhood, might not extend his excursions beyond a pedestrian day's limit;--he was, in fact, under surveillance. The colonel formally exacted his word of honour that he would not attempt to pass the bounds, and explained to the duchess that the injunction was favourable to the lieutenant, as implying that he must be ready at any moment to receive the order to join his regiment. Wilfrid bowed with a proper soldierly submission. Respecting the criminal whom his men were pursuing, Colonel Zofel said that he was sparing no efforts to come on his traces; he supposed, from what he had heard in the Ultenthal, that Guidascarpi was on his back somewhere within a short range of Meran. Vittoria strained her ears to the colonel's German; she fancied his communication to be that he suspected Angelo's presence in Meran.

The official part of his visit being terminated, the colonel addressed some questions to the duchess concerning the night of the famous Fifteenth at La Scala. He was an amateur, and spoke with enthusiasm of the reports of the new prima donna. The duchess perceived that he was asking for an introduction to the heroine of the night, and graciously said that perhaps that very prima donna would make amends, to him for his absence on the occasion. Vittoria checked a movement of revolt in her frame. She cast an involuntary look at Wilfrid. "Now it begins," she thought, and went to the piano: she had previously refused to sing. Wilfrid had to bend his head over his betrothed and listen to her whisperings. He did so, carelessly swaying his hand to the measure of the aria, with an increasing bitter comparison of the two voices. Lena persisted in talking; she was indignant at his abandonment of the journey to Venice; she reproached him as feeble, inconsiderate, indifferent. Then for an instant she would pause to hear the voice, and renew her assault. "We ought to be thankful that she is not singing a song of death and destruction to us! The archduchess is coming to Venice. If you are presented to her and please her, and get the writs of

naturalization prepared, you will be one of us completely, and your fortune is made. If you stay here--why should you stay? It is nothing but your uncle's caprice. I am too angry to care for music. If you stay, you will earn my contempt. I will not be buried another week in such a place. I am tired of weeping. We all go to Venice: Captain Weisspriess follows us. We are to have endless Balls, an opera, a Court there--with whom am I to dance, pray, when I am out of mourning? Am I to sit and govern my feet under a chair, and gaze like an imbecile nun? It is too preposterous. I am betrothed to you; I wish, I wish to behave like a betrothed. The archduchess herself will laugh to see me chained to a chair. I shall have to reply a thousand times to 'Where is he?' What can I answer? 'Wouldn't come,' will be the only true reply."

During this tirade, Vittoria was singing one of her old songs, well known to Wilfrid, which brought the vision of a foaming weir, and moonlight between the branches of a great cedar-tree, and the lost love of his heart sitting by his side in the noising stillness. He was sure that she could be singing it for no one but for him. The leap taken by his spirit from this time to that, was shorter than from the past back to the present.

"You do not applaud," said Lena, when the song had ceased.

He murmured: "I never do, in drawing-rooms."

"A cantatrice expects it everywhere; these creatures live on it."

"I'll tell her, if you like, what we thought of it, when I take her down to my sister, presently."

"Are you not to take me down?"

"The etiquette is to hand her up to you."

"No, no!" Lena insisted, in abhorrence of etiquette; but Wilfrid said pointedly that his sister's feelings must be spared. "Her husband is an animal: he is a millionaire city-of-London merchant; conceive him! He has drunk himself gouty on Port wine, and here he is for the grape-cure."

"Ah! in that England of yours, women marry for wealth," said Lena.

"Yes, in your Austria they have a better motive" he interpreted her sentiment.

"Say, in our Austria."

"In our Austria, certainly."

"And with our holy religion?"

"It is not yet mine."

"It will be?" She put the question eagerly.

Wilfrid hesitated, and by his adept hesitation succeeded in throwing her off the jealous scent.

"Say that it will be, my Wilfrid!"

"You must give me time"

"This subject always makes you cold."

"My own Lena!"

"Can I be, if we are doomed to be parted when we die?"

There is small space for compunction in a man's heart when he is in Wilfrid's state, burning with the revival of what seemed to him a superhuman attachment. He had no design to break his acknowledged bondage to Countess Lena, and answered her tender speech almost as tenderly.

It never occurred to him, as he was walking down to Meran with Vittoria, that she could suppose him to be bartering to help rescue the life of a wretched man in return for soft confidential looks of entreaty; nor did he reflect, that when cast on him, they might mean no more than the wish to move him for a charitable purpose. The completeness of her fascination was shown by his reading her entirely by his own emotions, so that a lowly-uttered word, or a wavering unwilling glance, made him think that she was subdued by the charm of the old days.

"Is it here?" she said, stopping under the first Italian name she saw in the arcade of shops.

"How on earth have you guessed it?" he asked, astonished.

She told him to wait at the end of the arcade, and passed in. When she joined him again, she was downcast. They went straight to Adela's hotel, where the one thing which gave her animation was the hearing that Mr. Sedley had met an English doctor there, and had placed himself in his hands. Adela dressed splendidly for her presentation to the duchess. Having done so, she noticed Vittoria's depressed countenance and difficult breathing. She commanded her to see the doctor. Vittoria consented, and made use of him. She could tell Laura confidently at night that Wilfrid would not betray Angelo, though she had not spoken one direct word to him on the subject.

Wilfrid was peculiarly adept in the idle game he played. One who is intent upon an evil end is open to expose his plan. But he had none in view; he lived for the luxurious sensation of being near the woman who fascinated him, and who was now positively abashed when by his side. Adela suggested to him faintly--she believed it was her spontaneous idea--that he might be making his countess jealous. He assured her that the fancy sprang from scenes which she remembered, and that she could have no idea of the pride of a highborn Austrian girl, who was incapable of

conceiving jealousy of a person below her class. Adela replied that it was not his manner so much as Emilia's which might arouse the suspicion; but she immediately affected to appreciate the sentiments of a highborn Austrian girl toward a cantatrice, whose gifts we regard simply as an aristocratic entertainment. Wilfrid induced his sister to relate Vittoria's early history to Countess Lena; and himself almost wondered, when he heard it in bare words, at that haunting vision of the glory of Vittoria at La Scala--where, as he remembered, he would have run against destruction to cling to her lips. Adela was at first alarmed by the concentrated wrathfulness which she discovered in the bosom of Countess Anna, who, as their intimacy waxed, spoke of the intruding opera siren in terms hardly proper even to married women; but it seemed right, as being possibly aristocratic. Lena was much more tolerant. "I have just the same enthusiasm for soldiers that my Wilfrid has for singers," she said; and it afforded Adela exquisite pleasure to hear her tell how that she had originally heard of the 'eccentric young Englishman,' General Pierson's nephew, as a Lustspiel--a comedy; and of his feats on horseback, and his duels, and his--he was very wicked over here, you know;" Lena laughed. She assumed the privileges of her four-and-twenty years and her rank. Her marriage was to take place in the Spring. She announced it with the simplicity of an independent woman of the world, adding, "That is, if my Wilfrid will oblige me by not plunging into further disgrace with the General."

"No; you will not marry a man who is under a cloud," Anna subjoined.

"Certainly not a soldier," said Lena. "What it was exactly that he did at La Scala, I don't know, and don't care to know, but he was then ignorant that she had touched the hand of that Guidascarpi. I decide by this--he was valiant; he defied everybody: therefore I forgive him. He is not in disgrace with me. I will reinstate him."

"You have your own way of being romantic," said Anna. "A soldier who forgets his duty is in my opinion only a brave fool."

"It seems to me that a great many gallant officers are fond of fine voices," Lena retorted.

"No doubt it is a fashion among them," said Anna.

Adela recoiled with astonishment when she began to see the light in which the sisters regarded Vittoria; and she was loyal enough to hint and protest on her friend's behalf. The sisters called her a very good soul.

"It may not be in England as over here," said Anna. "We have to submit to these little social scourges."

Lena whispered to Adela, "An angry woman will think the worst. I have no doubt of my Wilfrid. If I had!--"

Her eyes flashed. Fire was not wanting in her.

The difficulties which tasked the amiable duchess to preserve an outward show of peace among the antagonistic elements she gathered together were

increased by the arrival at the castle of Count Lenkenstein, Bianca's husband, and head of the family, from Bologna. He was a tall and courtly man, who had one face for his friends and another for the reverse party; which is to say, that his manners could be bad. Count Lenkenstein was accompanied by Count Serabiglione, who brought Laura's children with their Roman nurse, Assunta. Laura kissed her little ones, and sent them out of her sight. Vittoria found her home in their play and prattle. She needed a refuge, for Count Lenkenstein was singularly brutal in his bearing toward her. He let her know that he had come to Meran to superintend the hunt for the assassin, Angelo Guidascarpi. He attempted to exact her promise in precise speech that she would be on the spot to testify against Angelo when that foul villain should be caught. He objected openly to Laura's children going about with her. Bitter talk on every starting subject was exchanged across the duchess's table. She herself was in disgrace on Laura's account, and had to practise an overflowing sweetness, with no one to second her efforts. The two noblemen spoke in accord on the bubble revolution. The strong hand--ay, the strong hand! The strong hand disposes of vermin. Laura listened to them, pallid with silent torture. "Since the rascals have taken to assassination, we know that we have them at the dregs," said Count Lenkenstein. "A cord round the throats of a few scores of them, and the country will learn the virtue of docility."

Laura whispered to her sister: "Have you espoused a hangman?"

Such dropping of deadly shells in a quiet society went near to scattering it violently; but the union was necessitous. Count Lenkenstein desired to confront Vittoria with Angelo; Laura would not quit her side, and Amalia would not expel her friend. Count Lenkenstein complained roughly of Laura's conduct; nor did Laura escape her father's reproof. "Sir, you are privileged to say what you will to me," she responded, with the humility which exasperated him.

"Yes, you bend, you bend, that you may be stiff-necked when it suits you," he snapped her short.

"Surely that is the text of the sermon you preach to our Italy!"

"A little more, as you are running on now, madame, and our Italy will be froth on the lips. You see, she is ruined."

"Chi lo fa, lo sa," hummed Laura; "but I would avoid quoting you as that authority."

"After your last miserable fiasco, my dear!"

"It was another of our school exercises. We had not been good boys and girls. We had learnt our lesson imperfectly. We have received our punishment, and we mean to do better next time."

"Behave seasonably, fittingly; be less of a wasp; school your tongue."

"Bianca is a pattern to me, I am aware," said Laura.

"She is a good wife."

"I am a poor widow."

"She is a good daughter."

"I am a wicked rebel."

"And you are scheming at something now," said the little nobleman, sagacious so far; but he was too eager to read the verification of the tentative remark in her face, and she perceived that it was a guess founded on her show of spirit.

"Scheming to contain my temper, which is much tried," she said. "But I suppose it supports me. I can always keep up against hostility."

"You provoke it; you provoke it."

"My instinct, then, divines my medicine."

"Exactly, my dear; your personal instinct. That instigates you all. And none are so easily conciliated as these Austrians. Conciliate them, and you have them." Count Serabiglione diverged into a repetition of his theory of the policy and mission of superior intelligences, as regarded his system for dealing with the Austrians.

Nurse Assunta's jealousy was worked upon to separate the children from Vittoria. They ran down with her no more to meet the vast bowls of grapes in the morning and feather their hats with vine leaves. Deprived of her darlings, the loneliness of her days made her look to Wilfrid for commiseration. Father Bernardus was too continually exhortative, and fenced too much to "hit the eyeball of her conscience," as he phrased it, to afford her repose. Wilfrid could tell himself that he had already done much for her; for if what he had done were known, his career, social and military, was ended. This idea being accompanied by a sense of security delighted him; he was accustomed to inquire of Angelo's condition, and praise the British doctor who was attending him gratuitously. "I wish I could get him out of the way," he said, and frowned as in a mental struggle. Vittoria heard him repeat his "I wish!" It heightened greatly her conception of the sacrifice he would be making on her behalf and charity's. She spoke with a reverential tenderness, such as it was hard to suppose a woman capable of addressing to other than the man who moved her soul. The words she uttered were pure thanks; it was the tone which sent them winged and shaking seed. She had spoken partly to prompt his activity, but her self-respect had been sustained by his avoidance of the dreaded old themes, and that grateful feeling made her voice musically rich.

"I dare not go to him, but the doctor tells me the fever has left him, Wilfrid; his wounds are healing; but he is bandaged from head to foot. The sword pierced his side twice, and his arms and hands are cut horribly. He cannot yet walk. If he is discovered he is lost. Count

Lenkenstein has declared that he will stay at the castle till he has his prisoner. The soldiers are all round us. They know that Angelo is in the ring. They have traced him all over from the Valtellina to this Ultenthal, and only cannot guess where he is in the lion's jaw. I rise in the morning, thinking, 'Is this to be the black day?' He is sure to be caught."

"If I could hit on a plan," said Wilfrid, figuring as though he had a diorama of impossible schemes revolving before his eyes.

"I could believe in the actual whispering of an angel if you did. It was to guard me that Angelo put himself in peril."

"Then," said Wilfrid, "I am his debtor. I owe him as much as my life is worth."

"Think, think," she urged; and promised affection, devotion, veneration, vague things, that were too like his own sentiments to prompt him pointedly. Yet he so pledged himself to her by word, and prepared his own mind to conceive the act of service, that (as he did not reflect) circumstance might at any moment plunge him into a gulf. Conduct of this sort is a challenge sure to be answered.

One morning Vittoria was gladdened by a letter from Rocco Ricci, who had fled to Turin. He told her that the king had promised to give her a warm welcome in his capital, where her name was famous. She consulted with Laura, and they resolved to go as soon as Angelo could stand on his feet. Turin was cold--Italy, but it was Italy; and from Turin the Italian army was to flow, like the Mincio from the Garda lake. "And there, too, is a stage," Vittoria thought, in a suddenly revived thirst for the stage and a field for work. She determined to run down to Meran and see Angelo. Laura walked a little way with her, till Wilfrid, alert for these occasions, joined them. On the commencement of the zig-zag below, there were soldiers, the sight of whom was not confusing. Military messengers frequently came up to the castle where Count Lenkenstein, assisted by Count Serabiglione, examined their depositions, the Italian in the manner of a winding lawyer, the German of a gruff judge. Half-way down the zig-zag Vittoria cast a preconcerted signal back to Laura. The soldiers had a pair of prisoners between their ranks; Vittoria recognized the men who had carried Captain Weisspriess from the ground where the duel was fought. A quick divination told her that they held Angelo's life on their tongues. They must have found him in the mountain-pass while hurrying to their homes, and it was they who had led him to Meran. On the Pässeyr bridge, she turned and said to Wilfrid, "Help me now. Send instantly the doctor in a carriage to the place where he is lying."

Wilfrid was intent on her flushed beauty and the half-compressed quiver of her lip.

She quitted him and hurried to Angelo. Her joy broke out in a cry of thankfulness at sight of Angelo; he had risen from his bed; he could stand, and he smiled.

"That Jacopo is just now the nearest link to me," he said, when she related her having seen the two men guarded by soldiers; he felt helpless, and spoke in resignation. She followed his eye about the room till it rested on the stilet. This she handed to him. "If they think of having me alive!" he said softly. The Italian and his wife who had given him shelter and nursed him came in, and approved his going, though they did not complain of what they might chance to have incurred. He offered them his purse, and they took it. Minutes of grievous expectation went by; Vittoria could endure them no longer; she ran out to the hotel, near which, in the shade of a poplar, Wilfrid was smoking quietly. He informed her that his sister and the doctor had driven out to meet Captain Gambier; his brother-in-law was alone upstairs. Her look of amazement touched him more shrewdly than scorn, and he said, "What on earth can I do?"

"Order out a carriage. Send your brother-in-law in it. If you tell him 'for your health,' he will go."

"On my honour, I don't know where those three words would not send him," said Wilfrid; but he did not move, and was for protesting that he really could not guess what was the matter, and the ground for all this urgency.

Vittoria compelled her angry lips to speak out her suspicions explicitly, whereupon he glanced at the sun-glare in a meditation, occasionally blinking his eyes. She thought, "Oh, heaven! can he be waiting for me to coax him?" It was the truth, though it would have been strange to him to have heard it. She grew sure that it was the truth; never had she despised living creature so utterly as when she murmured, "My best friend! my brother! my noble Wilfrid! my old beloved! help me now, without loss of a minute."

It caused his breath to come and go unevenly.

"Repeat that--once, only once," he said.

She looked at him with the sorrowful earnestness which, as its meaning was shut from him, was so sweet.

"You will repeat it by-and-by?--another time? Trust me to do my utmost. Old beloved! What is the meaning of 'old beloved'? One word in explanation. If it means anything, I would die for you! Emilia, do you hear?--die for you! To me you are nothing old or by-gone, whatever I may be to you. To me--yes, I will order the carriage you are the Emilia--listen! listen! Ah! you have shut your ears against me. I am bound in all seeming, but I--you drive me mad; you know your power. Speak one word, that I may feel--that I may be convinced . . . , or not a single word; I will obey you without. I have said that you command my life."

In a block of carriages on the bridge, Vittoria perceived a lifted hand. It was Laura's; Beppo was in attendance on her. Laura drove up and said: "You guessed right; where is he?" The communications between them were more indicated than spoken. Beppo had heard Jacopo confess to his having conducted a wounded Italian gentleman into Meran. "That means that the

houses will be searched within an hour," said Laura; "my brother-in-law Bear is radiant." She mimicked the Lenkenstein physiognomy spontaneously in the run of her speech. "If Angelo can help himself ever so little, he has a fair start." A look was cast on Wilfrid; Vittoria nodded--Wilfrid was entrapped.

"Englishmen we can trust," said Laura, and requested him to step into her carriage. He glanced round the open space. Beppo did the same, and beheld the chasseur Jacob Baumwalder Feckelwitz crossing the bridge on foot, but he said nothing. Wilfrid was on the step of the carriage, for what positive object neither he nor the others knew, when his sister and the doctor joined them. Captain Gambier was still missing.

"He would have done anything for us," Vittoria said in Wilfrid's hearing.

"Tell us what plan you have," the latter replied fretfully.

She whispered: "Persuade Adela to make her husband drive out. The doctor will go too, and Beppo. They shall take Angelo. Our carriage will follow empty, and bring Mr. Sedley back."

Wilfrid cast his eyes up in the air, at the monstrous impudence of the project. "A storm is coming on," he suggested, to divert her reading of his grimace; but she was speaking to the doctor, who readily answered her aloud: "If you are certain of what you say." The remark incited Wilfrid to be no subordinate in devotion; handing Adela from the carriage, while the doctor ran up to Mr. Sedley, he drew her away. Laura and Vittoria watched the motion of their eyes and lips.

"Will he tell her the purpose?" said Laura.

Vittoria smiled nervously: "He is fibbing."

Marking the energy expended by Wilfrid in this art, the wiser woman said: "Be on your guard the next two minutes he gets you alone."

"You see his devotion."

"Does he see his compensation? But he must help us at any hazard."

Adela broke away from her brother twice, and each time he fixed her to the spot more imperiously. At last she ran into the hotel; she was crying. "A bad economy of tears," said Laura, commenting on the dumb scene, to soothe her savage impatience. "In another twenty minutes we shall have the city gates locked."

They heard a window thrown up; Mr. Sedley's head came out, and peered at the sky. Wilfrid said to Vittoria: "I can do nothing beyond what I have done, I fear."

She thought it was a petition for thanks, but Laura knew better; she said: "I see Count Lenkenstein on his way to the barracks."

Wilfrid bowed: "I may be able to serve you in that quarter."

He retired: whereupon Laura inquired how her friend could reasonably suppose that a man would ever endure being thanked in public.

"I shall never understand and never care to understand them," said Vittoria.

"It is a knowledge that is forced on us, my dear. May heaven make the minds of our enemies stupid for the next five hours!--Apropos of what I was saying, women and men are in two hostile camps. We have a sort of general armistice and everlasting strife of individuals--Ah!" she clapped hands on her knees, "here comes your doctor; I could fancy I see a pointed light on his head. Men of science, my Sandra, are always the humanest."

The chill air of wind preceding thunder was driving round the head of the vale, and Mr. Sedley, wrapped in furs, and feebly remonstrating with his medical adviser, stepped into his carriage. The doctor followed him, giving a grave recognition of Vittoria's gaze. Both gentlemen raised their hats to the ladies, who alighted as soon as they had gone in the direction of the Vintschgau road.

"One has only to furnish you with money, my Beppo," said Vittoria, complimenting his quick apprehensiveness. "Buy bread and cakes at one of the shops, and buy wine. You will find me where you can, when you have seen him safe. I have no idea of where my home will be. Perhaps England."

"Italy, Italy! faint heart," said Laura.

Furnished with money, Beppo rolled away gaily.

The doubt was in Laura whether an Englishman's wits were to be relied on in such an emergency; but she admitted that the doctor had looked full enough of serious meaning, and that the Englishman named Merthyr Powys was keen and ready. They sat a long half-hour, that thumped itself out like an alarm-bell, under the poplars, by the clamouring Passeyr, watching the roll and spring of the waters, and the radiant foam, while band-music played to a great company of visitors, and sounds of thunder drew near. Over the mountains above the Adige, the leaden fingers of an advance of the thunder-cloud pushed slowly, and on a sudden a mighty gale sat heaped blank on the mountain-top and blew. Down went the heads of the poplars, the river staggered in its leap, the vale was shuddering grey. It was like the transformation in a fairy tale; Beauty had taken her old cloak about her, and bent to calamity. The poplars streamed their length sideways, and in the pauses of the strenuous wind nodded and dashed wildly and white over the dead black water, that waxed in foam and hissed, showing its teeth like a beast enraged. Laura and Vittoria joined hands and struggled for shelter. The tent of a travelling circus from the South, newly-pitched on a grassplot near the river, was caught up and whirled in the air and flung in the face of a marching guard of soldiery, whom it swathed and bore sheer to earth, while on them and

around them a line of poplars fell flat, the wind whistling over them. Laura directed Vittoria's eyes to the sight. "See," she said, and her face was set hard with cold and excitement, so that she looked a witch in the uproar; "would you not say the devil is loose now Angelo is abroad?" Thunder and lightning possessed the vale, and then a vertical rain. At the first gleam of sunlight, Laura and Vittoria walked up to the Laubengasse--the street of the arcades, where they made purchases of numerous needless articles, not daring to enter the Italian's shop. A woman at a fruitstall opposite to it told them that no carriage could have driven up there. During their great perplexity, mud and rain-stained soldiers, the same whom they had seen borne to earth by the flying curtain, marched before the shop; the shop and the house were searched; the Italian and his old liming wife were carried away.

"Tell me now, that storm was not Angelo's friend!" Laura muttered.

"Can he have escaped?" said Vittoria.

"He is 'on horseback.'" Laura quoted the Italian proverb to signify that he had flown; how, she could not say, and none could inform her. The joy of their hearts rose in one fountain.

"I shall feel better blood in my body from this moment," Laura said; and Vittoria, "Oh! we can be strong, if we only resolve."

"You want to sing?"

"I do."

"I shall find pleasure in your voice now."

"The wicked voice!"

"Yes, the very wicked voice! But I shall be glad to hear it. You can sing to-night, and drown those Lenkensteins."

"If my Carlo could hear me!"

"Ah!" sighed the signora, musing. "He is in prison now. I remember him, the dearest little lad, fencing with my husband for exercise after they had been writing all day. When Giacomo was imprisoned, Carlo sat outside the prison walls till it was time for him to enter; his chin and upper lip were smooth as a girl's. Giacomo said to him, 'May you always have the power of going out, or not have a wife waiting for you.' Here they come." (She spoke of tears.) "It's because I am joyful. The channel for them has grown so dry that they prick and sting. Oh, Sandra! it would be pleasant to me if we might both be buried for seven days, and have one long howl of weakness together. A little bite of satisfaction makes me so tired. I believe there's something very bad for us in our always being at war, and never, never gaining ground. Just one spark of triumph intoxicates us. Look at all those people pouring out again. They are the children of fair weather. I hope the state of their health does not trouble them too much. Vienna sends consumptive patients here.

If you regard them attentively, you will observe that they have an anxious air. Their constitutions are not sound; they fear they may die."

Laura's irony was unforced; it was no more than a subtle discord naturally struck from the scene by a soul in contrast with it.

They beheld the riding forth of troopers and a knot of officers hotly conversing together. At another point the duchess and the Lenkenstein ladies, Count Lenkenstein, Count Serabiglione, and Wilfrid paced up and down, waiting for music. Laura left the public places and crossed an upper bridge over the Pässeyr, near the castle, by which route she skirted vines and dropped over sloping meadows to some shaded boulders where the Pässeyr found a sandy bay, and leaped in transparent green, and whitened and swung twisting in a long smooth body down a narrow chasm, and noised below. The thundering torrent stilled their sensations: and the water, making battle against great blocks of porphyry and granite, caught their thoughts. So strong was the impression of it on Vittoria's mind, that for hours after, every image she conceived seemed proper to the inrush and outpour; the elbowing, the tossing, the foaming, the burst on stones, and silvery bubbles under and silvery canopy above, the chattering and huzzaing; all working on to the one-toned fall beneath the rainbow on the castle-rock.

Next day, the chasseur Jacob Baumwalder Feckelwitz deposed in full company at Sonnenberg, that, obeying Count Serabiglione's instructions, he had gone down to the city, and had there seen Lieutenant Pierson with the ladies in front of the hotel; he had followed the English carriage, which took up a man who was standing ready on crutches at the corner of the Laubengasse, and drove rapidly out of the North-western gate, leading to Schlanders and Mals and the Engadine. He had witnessed the transfer of the crippled man from one carriage to another, and had raised shouts and given hue and cry, but the intervention of the storm had stopped his pursuit.

He was proceeding to say what his suppositions were. Count Lenkenstein lifted his finger for Wilfrid to follow him out of the room. Count Serabiglione went at their heels. Then Count Lenkenstein sent for his wife, whom Anna and Lena accompanied.

"How many persons are you going to ruin in the course of your crusade, my dear?" the duchess said to Laura.

"Dearest, I am penitent when I succeed," said Laura.

"If that young man has been assisting you, he is irretrievably ruined."

"I am truly sorry for him."

"As for me, the lectures I shall get in Vienna are terrible to think of. This is the consequence of being the friend of both parties, and a peace-maker."

Count Serabiglione returned alone from the scene at the examination,

rubbing his hands and nodding affably to his daughter. He maliciously declined to gratify the monster of feminine curiosity in the lump, and doled out the scene piecemeal. He might state, he observed, that it was he who had lured Beppo to listen at the door during the examination of the prisoners; and who had then planted a spy on him--following the dictation of precepts exceedingly old. "We are generally beaten, duchess; I admit it; and yet we generally contrive to show the brain. As I say, wed brains to brute force!--but my Laura prefers to bring about a contest instead of an union, so that somebody is certain to be struck, and"--the count spread out his arms and bowed his head--"deserves the blow." He informed them that Count Lenkenstein had ordered Lieutenant Pierson down to Meran, and that the lieutenant might expect to be cashiered within five days. "What does it matter?" he addressed Vittoria. "It is but a shuffling of victims; Lieutenant Pierson in the place of Guidascarp! I do not object."

Count Lenkenstein withdrew his wife and sisters from Sonnenberg instantly. He sent an angry message of adieu to the duchess, informing her that he alone was responsible for the behaviour of the ladies of his family. The poor duchess wept. "This means that I shall be summoned to Vienna for a scolding, and have to meet my husband," she said to Laura, who permitted herself to be fondled, and barely veiled her exultation in her apology for the mischief she had done. An hour after the departure of the Lenkensteins, the castle was again officially visited by Colonel Zofel. Vittoria and Laura received an order to quit the district of Meran before sunset. The two firebrands dropped no tears. "I really am sorry for others when I succeed," said Laura, trying to look sad upon her friend.

"No; the heart is eaten out of you both by excitement," said the duchess.

Her tender parting, "Love me," in the ear of Vittoria, melted one heart of the two.

Count Serabiglione continued to be buoyed up by his own and his daughter's recent display of a superior intellectual dexterity until the carriage was at the door and Laura presented her cheek to him. He said, "You will know me a wise man when I am off the table." His gesticulations expressed "Ruin, headlong ruin!" He asked her how she could expect him to be for ever repairing her follies. He was going to Vienna; how could he dare to mention her name there? Not even in a trifle would she consent to be subordinate to authority. Laura checked her replies--the surrendering, of a noble Italian life to the Austrians was such a trifle! She begged only that a poor wanderer might depart with a father's blessing. The count refused to give it; he waved her off in a fury of reproof; and so got smoothly over the fatal moment when money, or the promise of money, is commonly extracted from parental sources, as Laura explained his odd behaviour to her companion. The carriage-door being closed, he regained his courtly composure; his fury was displaced by a chiding finger, which he presently kissed. Father. Bernardus was on the steps beside the duchess, and his blessing had not been withheld from Vittoria, though he half confessed to her that she was a mystery in his mind, and would always be one.

"He can understand robust hostility," Laura said, when Vittoria recalled the look of his benevolent forehead and drooping eyelids; "but robust ductility does astonish him. He has not meddled with me; yet I am the one of the two who would be fair prey for an enterprising spiritual father, as the destined roan of heaven will find out some day."

She bent and smote her lap. "How little they know us, my darling! They take fever for strength, and calmness for submission. Here is the world before us, and I feel that such a man, were he to pounce on me now, might snap me up and lock me in a praying-box with small difficulty. And I am the inveterate rebel! What is it nourishes you and keeps you always aiming straight when you are alone? Once in Turin, I shall feel that I am myself. Out of Italy I have a terrible craving for peace. It seems here as if I must lean down to him, my beloved, who has left me."

Vittoria was in alarm lest Wilfrid should accost her while she drove from gate to gate of the city. They passed under the archway of the gate leading up to Schloss Tyrol, and along the road bordered by vines. An old peasant woman stopped them with the signal of a letter in her hand. "Here it is," said Laura, and Vittoria could not help smiling at her shrewd anticipation of it.

"May I follow?"

Nothing more than that was written.

But the bearer of the missive had been provided with a lead pencil to obtain the immediate reply.

"An admirable piece of foresight!" Laura's honest exclamation burst forth.

Vittoria had to look in Laura's face before she could gather her will to do the cruel thing which was least cruel. She wrote firmly:--

"Never follow me."

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

An angry woman will think the worst
Be on your guard the next two minutes he gets you alone
No word is more lightly spoken than shame
O heaven! of what avail is human effort?
She thought that friendship was sweeter than love
Taint of the hypocrisy which comes with shame
They take fever for strength, and calmness for submission
Women and men are in two hostile camps

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by George Meredith

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