Vittoria — Volume 8 eBook

Vittoria — Volume 8 by George Meredith

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THROUGH THE WINTER

Weisspriess and Wilfrid made their way toward Milan together, silently smoking, after one attempt at conversation, which touched on Vittoria's marriage; but when they reached Monza the officer slapped his degraded brother in arms upon the shoulder, and asked him whether he had any inclination to crave permission to serve in Hungary. For his own part, Weisspriess said that he should quit Italy at once; he had here to skewer the poor devils, one or two weekly, or to play the mightily generous; in short, to do things unsoldierly; and he was desirous of getting away from the country. General Schoneck was at Monza, and might arrange the matter for them both. Promotion was to be looked for in Hungary; the application would please the General; one battle would restore the lieutenant's star to Wilfrid's collar. Wilfrid, who had been offended by his companion's previous brooding silence, nodded briefly, and they stopped at Monza, where they saw General Schoneck in the morning, and Wilfrid being by extraordinary favour in civilian's dress during his leave of absence, they were jointly invited to the General's table at noon, though not to meet any other officer. General Schoneck agreed with Weisspriess that Hungary would be a better field for Wilfrid; said he would do his utmost to serve them in the manner they wished, and dismissed them after the second cigar. They strolled about the city, glad for reasons of their own to be out of Milan as long as the leave permitted. At night, when they were passing a palace in one of the dark streets, a feather, accompanied by a sharp sibilation from above, dropped on Wilfrid's face. Weisspriess held the feather up, and judged by its length that it was an eagle's, and therefore belonging to the Hungarian Hussar regiment stationed in Milan. "The bird's aloft," he remarked. His voice aroused a noise of feet that was instantly still. He sent a glance at the doorways, where he thought he discerned men. Fetching a whistle in with his breath, he unsheathed his sword, and seeing that Wilfrid had no weapon, he pushed him to a gate of the palace-court that had just cautiously turned a hinge. Wilfrid found his hand taken by a woman's hand inside. The gate closed behind him. He was led up to an apartment where, by the light of a darkly-veiled lamp, he beheld a young Hungarian officer and a lady clinging to his neck, praying him not to go forth. Her Italian speech revealed how matters stood in this house. The officer accosted Wilfrid: "But you are not one of us!" He repeated it to the lady: "You see, the man is not one of us!"

She assured him that she had seen the uniform when she dropped the feather, and wept protesting it.

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

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

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

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

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

He flourished his hand above the lady’s head, and called for a sword. The lady affected to search for one while he stalked up and down in the jaunty fashion of a Magyar horseman; but the sword was not to be discovered without his assistance, and he was led away in search of it. The moment he was alone Wilfrid burst into tears. He could bear anything better than the sight of fondling lovers. When they rejoined him, Radocky had evidently yielded some point; he stammered and worked his underlip on his moustache. The lady undertook to speak for him. Happily for her, she said, Wilfrid would not compromise her; and taking her lover’s hand, she added with Italian mixture of wit and grace: “Happily for me, too, he does. The house is surrounded by enemies; it is a reign of terror for women. I am dead, if they slay him; but if they recognize him, I am lost.”

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

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

“The Prince Radocky is now safe,” Wilfrid said.

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

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

Her voice changed when she accepted Wilfrid’s adieux, to whose fate in the deadly street she appeared quite indifferent, though she gave him one or two prudent directions, and expressed a hope that she might be of service to him.

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

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

Wilfrid was twirled and pushed through the crowd till he got free of them. He understood very well that they were magnanimous rascals who could let an accomplice go, though they would have driven steel into the principal.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wilfrid begged for their names.

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

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

"Countess Lena von Lenkenstein, Countess Violetta d'Isorella, signorina Irma di Karski."

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

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

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

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

As Wilfrid was directing his steps to barracks (the little stir to his pride superinduced by these remarks having demoralized him), Count Lenkenstein shouted: "Are you off duty? "Wilfrid had nearly replied that he was, but just mastered himself in time. "No, indeed!" said the count, "when you have sent up your name to a lady." This time General Pierson put two fingers formally to his cap, and smiled grimly at the private's rigid figure of attention. If Wilfrid's form of pride had consented to let him take delight in the fact, he would have seen at once that prosperity was ready to shine on him. He

nursed the vexations much too tenderly to give prosperity a welcome; and even when along with Lena, and convinced of her attachment, and glad of it, he persisted in driving at the subject which had brought him to her house; so that the veil of opening commonplaces, pleasant to a couple in their position, was plucked aside. His business was to ask her why she was the enemy of Countess Alessandra Ammiani, and to entreat her that she should not seek to harm that lady. He put it in a set speech. Lena felt that it ought to have come last, not in advance of their reconciliation. "I will answer you," she said. "I am not the Countess Alessandra Ammiani's enemy."

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He asked her: “Could you be her friend?”

“Does a woman who has a husband want a friend?”

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

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

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

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Pericles accompanied him into a caffe, the picture of an enamoured happy man. He waived aside contemptuously all mention of Vittoria's having enemies. She had them when, as a virgin, she had no sense. As a woman, she had none, for she now had sense. Had she not brought her husband to be sensible, so that they moved together in Milanese society, instead of stupidly fighting at Rome? so that what he could not take to himself—the marvellous voice—he let bless the multitude! "She is the Beethoven of singers," Pericles concluded. Wilfrid thought so on the night when she sang to succour the Lombard widows. It was at a concert, richly thronged; ostentatiously thronged with Austrian uniforms. He fancied that he could not bear to look on her. He left the house thinking that to hear her and see her and feel that she was one upon the earth, made life less of a burden.

This evening was rendered remarkable by a man's calling out, "You are a traitress!" while Vittoria stood before the seats. She became pale, and her eyelids closed. No thinness was subsequently heard in her voice. The man was caught as he strove to burst through the crowd at the entrance-door, and proved to be a petty bookseller of Milan, by name Sarpo, known as an orderly citizen. When taken he was inflamed with liquor. Next day the man was handed from the civil to the military authorities, he having confessed to the existence of a plot in the city. Pericles came fuming to Wilfrid's quarters. Wilfrid gathered from him that Sarpo's general confession had been retracted: it was too foolish to snare the credulity of Austrian officials. Sarpo stated that he had fabricated the story of a plot, in order to escape the persecutions of a terrible man, and find safety in prison lodgings vender Government. The short confinement for a civic offence was not his idea of safety; he desired to be sheltered by Austrian soldiers and a fortress, and said that his torments were insupportable while Barto Rizzo was at large. This infamous Republican had latterly been living in his house, eating his bread, and threatening death to him unless he obeyed every command. Sarpo had undertaken his last mission for the purpose of supplying his lack of resolution to release himself from his horrible servitude by any other means; not from personal animosity toward the Countess Alessandra Ammiani, known as la Vittoria. When seized, fear had urged him to escape. Such was his second story. The points seemed irreconcilable to those who were not in the habit of taking human nature into their calculations of a possible course of conduct; even Wilfrid, though he was aware that Barto Rizzo hated Vittoria inveterately, imagined Sarpo's first lie to have necessarily fathered a second. But the second story was true: and the something like lover's wrath with which the outrage to Vittoria fired Pericles, prompted him to act on it as truth. He told Wilfrid that he should summon

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Barto Rizzo to his presence. As the Government was unable to exhibit so much power, Wilfrid looked sarcastic; whereupon Pericles threw up his chin crying: “Oh! you shall know my resources. Now, my friend, one bit of paper, and a messenger, and zen home to my house, to Tokay and cigarettes, and wait to see.” He remarked after pencilling a few lines, “Countess d’Isorella is her enemy? hein!”

“Why, you wouldn’t listen to me when I told you,” said Wilfrid.

“No,” Pericles replied while writing and humming over his pencil; “my ear is a pelican-pouch, my friend; it—and Irma is her enemy also?—it takes and keeps, but does not swallow till it wants. I shall hear you, and I shall hear my Sandra Vittoria, and I shall not know you have spoken, when by-and-by I tinkle, tinkle, a bell of my brain, and your word walks in,— ’quite well?’—’very well! ’—sit down’—’if it is ze same to you, I prefer to stand’—’good; zen I examine you.’ My motto:—’Time opens ze gates: my system: ’it is your doctor of regiment’s system when your twelve, fifteen, forty recruits strip to him:—-’Ah! you, my man, have varicose vein: no soldier in our regiment, you!’ So on. Perhaps I am not intelligible; but, hear zis. I speak not often of my money; but I say—it is in your ear—a man of millions, he is a king!” The Greek jumped up and folded a couple of notes. “I will not have her disturbed. Let her sing now and awhile to Pericles and his public: and to ze Londoners, wiz your permission, Count Ammiani, one saison. I ask no more, and I am satisfied, and I endow your oldest child, signor Conte—it is said! For its mama was a good girl, a brave girl; she troubled Pericles, because he is an intellect; but he forgives when he sees sincerity—rare zing! Sincerity and genius: it may be zey are as man and wife in a bosom. He forgives; it is not onnly voice he craves, but a soul, and Sandra, your countess, she has a soul—I am not a Turk. I say, it is a woman in whom a girl I did see a soul! A woman when she is married, she is part of ze man; but a soul, it is for ever alone, apart, confounded wiz nobody! For it I followed Sandra, your countess. It was a sublime devotion of a dog. Her voice tsrilled, her soul possessed me, Your countess is my Sandra still. I shall be pleased if child-bearing trouble her not more zan a very little; but, enfin! she is married, and you and I, my friend Wilfrid, we must accept ze decree, and say, no harm to her out of ze way of nature, by Saint Nicolas! or any what saint you choose for your invocation. Come along. And speed my letters by one of your militaires at once off. Are Pericles’ millions gold of bad mint? If so, he is an incapable. He presumes it is not so. Come along; we will drink to her in essence of Tokay. You shall witness two scenes. Away!”

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Wilfrid was barely to be roused from his fit of brooding into which Pericles had thrown him. He sent the letters, and begged to be left to sleep. The image of Vittoria seen through this man's mind was new, and brought a new round of torments. "The devil take you," he cried when Pericles plucked at his arm, "I've sent the letters; isn't that enough?" He was bitterly jealous of the Greek's philosophic review of the conditions of Vittoria's marriage; for when he had come away from the concert, not a thought of her being a wife had clouded his resignation to the fact. He went with Pericles, nevertheless, and was compelled to acknowledge the kindling powers of the essence of Tokay. "Where do you get this stuff?" he asked several times. Pericles chattered of England, and Hagar's 'Addio,' and 'Camilla.' What cabinet operas would he not give! What entertainments! Could an emperor offer such festivities to his subjects? Was a Field Review equal to Vittoria's voice? He stung Wilfrid's ears by insisting on the mellowed depth, the soft human warmth, which marriage had lent to the voice. At a late hour his valet announced Countess d'Isorella. "Did I not say so?" cried Pericles, and corrected himself: "No, I did not say so; it was a surprise to you, my friend. You shall see; you shall hear. Now you shall see what a friend Pericles can be when a person satisfy him." He pushed Wilfrid into his dressing-room, and immediately received the countess with an outburst of brutal invectives—pulling her up and down the ranked regiment of her misdeeds, as it were. She tried dignity, tried anger, she affected amazement, she petitioned for the heads of his accusations, and, as nothing stopped him, she turned to go. Pericles laughed when she had left the room. Irma di Karski was announced the next minute, and Countess d'Isorella re-appeared beside her. Irma had a similar greeting. "I am lost," she exclaimed. "Yes, you are lost," said Pericles; "a word from me, and the back of the public is humped at you—ha! contessa, you touched Mdlle. Irma's hand? She is to be on her guard, and never to think she is lost till down she goes? You are a more experienced woman! I tell you I will have no nonsense. I am Countess Alessandra Ammiani's friend. You two, you women, are her enemies. I will ruin you both. You would prevent her singing in public places—you, Countess d'Isorella, because you do not forgive her marriage to Count Ammiani; you, Irma, to spite her for her voice. You would hiss her out of hearing, you two miserable creatures. Not another soldo for you! Not one! and to-morrow, countess, I will see my lawyer. Irma, begone, and shriek to your wardrobe!"

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

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

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

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

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

The news that Vittoria had been assassinated traversed the city. Carlo was in Turin, Merthyr in Rome. Pericles was one of the first who reached the house; he was coming out when Wilfrid and the Duchess of Graatli drove up; and he accused the Countess d'Isorella flatly of having instigated the murder. He was frantic. They supposed that she must have succumbed to the wound. The duchess sent for Laura. There was a press of carriages and soft-humming people in the street; many women and men sobbing. Wilfrid had to wait an hour for the duchess, who brought comfort when she came. Her first words were reassuring. "Ah!" she said, "did I not do well to make you drive here with me instead of with Lena? Those eyes of yours would be unpardonable to her. Yes, indeed; though a corpse were lying in this house; but Countess Alessandra is safe. I have seen her. I have held her hand."

Wilfrid kissed the duchess's hand passionately.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER XLI

THE INTERVIEW

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

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

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

“She would have escaped that horrible knife,” Merthyr sighed.

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

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

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The question came with great simplicity.

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

“Your whole life is the proof of it. The women of your country are intolerable to me, Merthyr: but I do see the worth of the men. Sandra has taught me. She can think of you, talk of you, kiss the vision of you, and still be a faithful woman in our bondage of flesh; and to us you know what a bondage it is: How can that be? I should have asked, if I had not seen it. Dearest, she loves her husband, and she loves you. She has two husbands, and she turns to the husband of her spirit when that, or any, dagger strikes her bosom. Carlo has an unripe mind. They have been married but a little more than four months; and he reveres her and loves her.” . . . . Laura’s voice dragged. “Multiply the months by thousands, we shall not make those two lives one. It is the curse of man’s education in Italy? He can see that she has wits and courage. He will not consent to make use of them. You know her: she is not one to talk of these things. She, who has both heart and judgement—she is merely a little boat tied to a big ship. Such is their marriage. She cannot influence him. She is not allowed to advise him. And she is the one who should lead the way. And—if she did, we should now be within sight of the City.”

Laura took his hand. She found it moist, though his face was calm and his chest heaved regularly. An impish form of the pity women feel for us at times moved her to say, “Your skin is as bronzed as it was last year. Sandra spoke of it. She compared it to a young vine-leaf. I wonder whether girls have really an admonition of what is good for them while they are going their ways like destined machines?”

“Almost all men are of flesh and blood,” said Merthyr softly.

“I spoke of girls.”

“I speak of men.”

“Blunt—witted that I am! Of course you did. But do not imagine that she is not happy with her husband. They are united firmly.”

“The better for her, and him, and me,” said Merthyr.

Laura twisted an end of her scarf with fretful fingers. “Carlo Albert has crossed the Ticino?”

“Is about to do so,” Merthyr rejoined.

“Will Rome hold on if he is defeated?”

“Rome has nothing to fear on that side.”

“But you do not speak hopefully of Rome.”

“I suppose I am thinking of other matters.”

“You confess it!”

The random conversation wearied him. His foot tapped the floor.

“Why do you say that?” he asked.

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“Verily, for no other reason than that I have a wicked curiosity, and that you come from Rome,” said Laura, now perfectly frank, and believing that she had explained her enigmatical talk, if she had not furnished an excuse for it. Merthyr came from the City which was now encircled by an irradiating halo in her imagination, and a fit of spontaneous inexplicable feminine tenderness being upon her at the moment of their meeting, she found herself on a sudden prompted to touch and probe and brood voluptuously over an unfortunate lover’s feelings, supposing that they existed. For the glory of Rome was on him, and she was at the same time angry with Carlo Ammiani. It was the form of passion her dedicated widowhood could still be subject to in its youth; the sole one. By this chance Merthyr learnt what nothing else would have told him.

Her tale of the attempted assassination was related with palpable indifference. She stated the facts. “The woman seemed to gasp while she had her hand up; she struck with no force; and she has since been inanimate, I hear. The doctor says that a spasm of the heart seized her when she was about to strike. It has been shaken—I am not sure that he does not say displaced, or unseated—by some one of her black tempers. She shot Rinaldo Guidascarpi dead. Perhaps it was that. I am informed that she worshipped the poor boy, and has been like a trapped she-wolf since she did it. In some way she associated our darling with Rinaldo’s death, like the brute she is. The ostensible ground for her futile bit of devilishness was that she fancied Sandra to have betrayed Barto Rizzo, her husband, into the hands of the polizia. He wrote to the Countess Alessandra—such a letter!—a curiosity!—he must see her and cross-examine her to satisfy himself that she was a true patriot, &c. You know the style: we neither of us like it. Sandra was waiting to receive him when they pounced on him by the door. Next day the woman struck at her. Decidedly a handsome woman. She is the exact contrast to the Countess Violetta in face, in everything. Heart-disease will certainly never affect that pretty spy! But, mark,” pursued Laura, warming, “when Carlo arrived, tears, penitence, heaps of self-accusations: he had been unkind to her even on Lake Orta, where they passed their golden month; he had neglected her at Turin; he had spoken angry words in Milan; in fact, he had misused his treasure, and begged pardon; —’If you please, my poor bleeding angel, I am sorry. But do not, I entreat, distract me with petitions of any sort, though I will perform anything earthly to satisfy you. Be a good little boat in the wake of the big ship. I will look over at you, and chirrup now and then to you, my dearest, when I am not engaged in piloting extraordinary.’—Very well; I do not mean to sneer at the unhappy boy, Merthyr; I love him; he was my husband’s brother in arms; the sweetest lad ever seen. He is in the season

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of faults. He must command; he must be a chief; he fancies he can intrigue poor thing! It will pass. And so will the hour to be forward to Rome. But I call your attention to this: when he heard of the dagger—I have it from Colonel Corte, who was with him at the time in Turin—he cried out Violetta d'Isorella's name. Why? After he had buried his head an hour on Sandra's pillow, he went straight to Countess d'Isorella, and was absent till night. The woman is hideous to me. No; don't conceive that I think her Sandra's rival. She is too jealous. She has him in some web. If she has not ruined him, she will. She was under my eyes the night she heard of his marriage: I saw how she will look at seventy! Here is Carlo at the head of a plot she has prepared for him; and he has Angelo Guidascarpi, and Ugo Corte, Marco Sana, Giulio Bandinelli, and about fifty others. They have all been kept away from Rome by that detestable ----- you object to hear bad names cast on women, Merthyr. Hear Agostino! The poor old man comes daily to this house to persuade Carlo to lead his band to Rome. It is so clearly Rome—Rome, where all his comrades are; where the chief stand must be made by the side of Italy's Chief. Worst sign of all, it has been hinted semi-officially to Carlo that he may upon application be permitted to re-issue his journal. Does not that show that the Government wishes to blindfold him, and keep him here, and knows his plans?"

Laura started up as the door opened, and Vittoria appeared leaning upon Carlo's arm. Countess Ammiani, Countess d'Isorella, and Pericles were behind them. Laura's children followed.

When Merthyr rose, Vittoria was smiling in Carlo's face at something that had been spoken. She was pale, and her arm was in a sling, but there was no appearance of her being unnerved. Merthyr waited for her recognition of him. She turned her eyes from Carlo slowly. The soft dull smile in them died out as it were with a throb, and then her head drooped on one shoulder, and she sank to the floor.

CHAPTER XLII

THE SHADOW ON CONSPIRACY

Merthyr left the house at Laura's whispered suggestion. He was agitated beyond control, for Vittoria had fallen with her eyes fixed on him; and at times the picture of his beloved, her husband, and Countess Ammiani, and the children bending over her still body, swam before him like a dark altar-piece floating in incense, so lost was he to the reality of that scene. He did not hear Beppo, his old servant, at his heels. After a while he walked calmly, and Beppo came up beside him. Merthyr shook his hand.

"Ah, signor Mertyrio! ah, padrone!" said Beppo.

Merthyr directed his observation to a regiment of Austrians marching down the Corso Venezia to the Ticinese gate.

“Yes, they are ready enough for us,” Beppo remarked. “Perhaps Carlo Alberto will beat them this time. If he does, viva to him! If they beat him, down goes another Venetian pyramid. The Countess Alessandra—” Beppo’s speech failed.

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“What of your mistress?” said Merthyr.

“When she dies, my dear master, there’s no one for me but the Madonna to serve.”

“Why should she die, silly fellow?”

“Because she never cries.”

Merthyr was on the point of saying, “Why should she cry?” His heart was too full, and he shrank from inquisitive shadows of the thing known to him.

“Sit down at this caffe with me,” he said. It’s fine weather for March. The troops will camp comfortably. Those Hungarians never require tents. Did you see much sacking of villages last year?”

“Padrone, the Imperial command is always to spare the villages.”

“That’s humane.”

“Padrone, yes; if policy is humanity.”

“It’s humanity not carried quite as far as we should wish it.”

Beppo shrugged and said: “It won’t leave much upon the conscience if we kill them.”

“Do you expect a rising?” said Merthyr.

“If the Ticino overflows, it will flood Milan,” was the answer.

“And your occupation now is to watch the height of the water?”

“My occupation, padrone? I am not on the watch-tower.” Beppo winked, adding: “I have my occupation.” He threw off the effort or pretence to be discreet. “Master of my soul! this is my occupation. I drink coffee, but I do not smoke, because I have to kiss a pretty girl, who means to object to the smell of the smoke. Via! I know her! At five she draws me into the house.”

“Are you relating your amours to me, rascal?” Merthyr interposed.

“Padrone, at five precisely she draws me into the house. She is a German girl. Pardon me if I make no war on women. Her name is Aennchen, which one is able to say if one grimaces;—why not? It makes her laugh; and German girls are amiable when one can make them laugh. ’Tis so that they begin to melt. Behold the difference of races! I must kiss her to melt her, and then have a quarrel. I could have it after the first, or the fiftieth with an Italian girl; but my task will be excessively difficult with a German girl, if I

am compelled to allow myself to favour her with one happy solicitation for a kiss, to commence with. We shall see. It is, as my abstention from tobacco declares, an anticipated catastrophe."

"Long-worded, long-winded, obscure, affirmatizing by negatives, confessing by implication!—where's the beginning and end of you, and what's your meaning?" said Merthyr, who talked to him as one may talk to an Italian servant.

"The contessa, my mistress, has enemies. Padrone, I devote myself to her service."

"By making love to a lady's maid?"

"Padrone, a rat is not born to find his way up the grand staircase. She has enemies. One of them was the sublime Barto Rizzo—admirable—though I must hate him. He said to his wife: 'If a thing happens to me, stab to the heart the Countess Alessandra Ammiani.'"

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“Inform me how you know that?” said Merthyr.

Beppo pointed to his head, and Merthyr smiled. To imagine, invent, and believe, were spontaneous with Beppo when has practical sagacity was not on the stretch. He glanced at the caffe clock.

“Padrone, at eleven to-night shall I see you here? At eleven I shall come like a charged cannon. I have business. I have seen my mistress’s blood! I will tell you: this German girl lets me know that some one detests my mistress. Who? I am off to discover. But who is the damned creature? I must coo and kiss, while my toes are dancing on hot plates, to find her out. Who is she? If she were half Milan . . .”

His hands waved in outline the remainder of the speech, and he rose, but sat again. He had caught sight of the spy, Luigi Saracco, addressing the signor Antonio-Pericles in his carriage. Pericles drove on. The horses presently turned, and he saluted Merthyr.

“She has but one friend in Milan: it is myself,” was his introductory remark. “My poor child! my dear Powys, she is the best—’I cannot sing to you to-day, dear Pericles’—she said that after she had opened her eyes; after the first mist, you know. She is the best child upon earth. I could wish she were a devil, my Powys. Such a voice should be in an iron body. But she has immense health. The doctor, who is also mine, feels her pulse. He assures me it goes as Time himself, and Time, my friend, you know, has the intention of going a great way. She is good: she is too good. She makes a baby of Pericles, to whom what is woman? Have I not the sex in my pocket? Her husband, he is a fool, ser.” Pericles broke thundering into a sentence of English, fell in love with it, and resumed in the same tongue: “I—it is I zat am her guard, her safety. Her husband—oh! she must marry a young man, little donkey zat she is! We accept it as a destiny, my Powys. And he plays false to her. Good; I do not object. But, imagine in your own mind, my Powys—instead of passion, of rage, of tempest, she is frozen wiz a repose. Do you, hein? sink it will come out,”—Pericles eyed Merthyr with a subtle smile askew,—“I have sot so;—it will come out when she is one day in a terrible scene . . . Mon Dieu! it was a terrible scene for me when I looked on ze clout zat washed ze blood of ze terrible assassination. So goes out a voice, possibly! Divine, you say? We are a machine. Now, you behold, she has faints. It may happen at my concert where she sings to-morrow night. You saw me in my carriage speaking to a man. He is my spy—-my dog wiz a nose. I have set him upon a woman. If zat woman has a plot for to-morrow night to spoil my concert, she shall not know where she shall wake to-morrow morning after. Ha! here is military music— twenty sossand doors jam on horrid hinge; and right, left, right, left, to it, confound! like dolls all wiz one face. Look at your soldiers, Powys. Put zem on a stage, and you see all background people—a bawling chorus. It shows to you how superior it is—a stage to life! Hark to such music! I cannot stand it; I am driven away; I am violent; I rage.”

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Pericles howled the name of his place of residence, with an offer of lodgings in it, and was carried off writhing his body as he passed a fine military marching band.

The figure of old Agostino Balderini stood in front of Merthyr. They exchanged greetings. At the mention of Rome, Agostino frowned impatiently. He spoke of Vittoria in two or three short exclamations, and was about to speak of Carlo, but checked his tongue. “Judge for yourself. Come, and see, and approve, if you can. Will you come? There’s a meeting; there’s to be a resolution. Question—Shall we second the King of Sardinia, Piedmont, and Savoy? If so, let us set this pumpkin, called Milan, on its legs. I shall be an attentive listener like you, my friend. I speak no more.”

Merthyr went with him to the house of a carpenter, where in one of the uppermost chambers communicating with the roof, Ugo Corte, Marco Sana, Giulio Bandinelli, and others, sat waiting for the arrival of Carlo Ammiani; when he came Carlo had to bear with the looks of mastiffs for being late. He shook Merthyr’s hand hurriedly, and as soon as the door was fastened, began to speak. His first sentence brought a grunt of derision from Ugo Corte. It declared that there was no hope of a rising in Milan. Carlo swung round upon the Bergamasc. “Observe our leader,” Agostino whispered to Merthyr; “it would be kindness to give him a duel.” More than one tumult of outcries had to be stilled before Merthyr gathered any notion of the designs of the persons present. Bergamasc sneered at Brescian, and both united in contempt of the Milanese, who, having a burden on their minds, appealed at once to their individual willingness to use the sword in vindication of Milan against its traducers. By a great effort, Carlo got some self-mastery. He admitted, colouring horribly, that Brescia and Bergamo were ready, and Milan was not; therefore those noble cities (he read excerpts from letters showing their readiness) were to take the lead, and thither on the morrow-night he would go, let the tidings from the king’s army be what they might.

Merthyr quitted the place rather impressed by his eloquence, but unfavourably by his feverish look. Countess d’Isorella had been referred to as one who served the cause ably and faithfully. In alluding to her, Carlo bit his lip; he did not proceed until surrounding murmurs of satisfaction encouraged him to continue a sort of formal eulogy of the lady, which proved to be a defence against foregone charges, for Corte retracted an accusation, and said that he had no fault to find with the countess. A proposal to join the enterprise was put to Merthyr, but his engagement with the Chief in Rome saved him from hearing much of the marvellous facilities of the plot. “I should have wished to see you to-night,” Carlo said as they were parting. Merthyr named his hotel. Carlo nodded. “My wife is still slightly feeble,” he said.

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“I regret it,” Merthyr rejoined.

“She is not ill.”

“No, it cannot be want of courage,” Merthyr spoke at random.

“Yes, that’s true,” said Carlo, as vacantly. “You will see her while I am travelling.”

“I hope to find the Countess Alessandra well enough to receive me.”

“Always; always,” said Carlo, wishing apparently to say more. Merthyr waited an instant, but Carlo broke into a conventional smile of adieu.

“While he is travelling,” Merthyr repeated to Agostino, who had stood by during the brief dialogue, and led the way to the Corso.

“He did not say how far!” was the old man’s ejaculation.

“But, good heaven! if you think he’s on an unfortunate errand, why don’t you stop him, advise him?” Merthyr broke out.

“Advise him! stop him! my friend. I would advise him, if I had the patience of angels; stop him, if I had the power of Lucifer. Did you not see that he shunned speaking to me? I have been such a perpetual dish of vinegar under his nose for the last month, that the poor fellow sniffs when I draw near. He must go his way. He leads a torrent that must sweep him on. Corte, Sana, and the rest would be in Rome now, but for him. So should I. Your Agostino, however, is not of Bergamo, or of Brescia; he is not a madman; simply a poor rheumatic Piedmontese, who discerns the point where a united Italy may fix its standard. I would start for Rome to-morrow, if I could leave her—my soul’s child!” Agostino raised his hand: “I do love the woman, Countess Alessandra Ammiani. I say, she is a peerless woman. Is she not?”

“There is none like her,” said Merthyr.

“A peerless woman, recognized and sacrificed! I cannot leave her. If the Government here would lay hands on Carlo and do their worst at once, I would be off. They are too wary. I believe that they are luring him to his ruin. I can give no proofs, but I judge by the best evidence. What avails my telling him? I lose my temper the moment I begin to speak. A curst witch beguiles the handsome idiot—poor darling lad that he is! She has him—can I tell you how? She has got him—got him fast! —The nature of the chains are doubtless innocent, if those which a woman throws round us be ever distinguishable. He loves his wife—he is not a monster.”

“He appears desperately feverish,” said Merthyr.

“Did you not notice it? Yes, like a man pushed by his destiny out of the path. He is ashamed to hesitate; he cannot turn back. Ahead of him he sees a gulf. That army of Carlo Alberto may do something under its Pole. Prophecy is too easy. I say no more. We may have Lombardy open; and if so, my poor boy’s vanity will be crowned: he will only have the king and his army against him then.”

Discoursing in this wise, they reached the caffe where Beppo had appointed to meet his old master, and sat amid here and there a whitecoat, and many nods and whispers over such news as the privileged journals and the official gazette afforded.

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Beppo's destination was to the Duchess of Graatli's palace. Nearing it, he perceived Luigi endeavouring to gain a passage beside the burly form of Jacob Baumwalder Feckelwitz, who presently seized him and hurled him into the road. As Beppo was sidling up the courtway, Jacob sprang back; Luigi made a rush; Jacob caught them both, but they wriggled out of his clutch, and Luigi, being the fearfuller, ran the farthest. While he was out of hearing, Beppo told Jacob to keep watch upon Luigi, as the bearer of an amorous letter from a signor of quality to Aennchen, the which he himself desired to obtain sight of; "for the wench has caused me three sleepless nights," he confessed frankly. Jacob affected not to understand. Luigi and Beppo now leaned against the wall on either side of him and baited him till he shook with rage.

"He is the lord of the duchess, his mistress—what a lucky fellow!" said Luigi. "When he's dog at the gates no one can approach her. When he isn't, you can fancy what!"—-"He's only a mechanical contrivance; he's not a man," said Beppo. "He's the principal flea-catcher of the palace," said Luigi—"here he is all day, and at night the devil knows where he hunts."—Luigi hopped in a half-circle round the exacerbated Jacob, and finally provoked an assault that gave an opening to Beppo. They all ran in, Luigi last. Jacob chased Beppo up the stairs, lost him, and remembered what he had said of the letter borne by Luigi, for whom he determined to lie in waiting. "Better two in there than one," he thought. The two courted his Aennchen openly; but Luigi, as the bearer of an amorous letter from the signor of quality, who could be no other than signor Antonio-Pericles, was the one to be intercepted. Like other jealous lovers, Jacob wanted to read Aennchen's answer, to be cured of his fatal passion for the maiden, and on this he set the entire force of his mind.

Running up by different staircases, Beppo and Luigi came upon Aennchen nearly at the same time. She turned a cold face on Beppo, and requested Luigi to follow her. Astonished to see him in such favour, Beppo was ready to provoke the quarrel before the kiss when she returned; but she said that she had obeyed her mistress's orders, and was obeying the duchess in refusing to speak of them, or of anything relating to them. She had promised him an interview in that little room leading into the duchess's boudoir. He pressed her to conduct him. "Ah; then it's not for me you come," she said. Beppo had calculated that the kiss would open his way to the room, and the quarrel disembarrass him of his pretty companion when there. "You have come to listen to conversation again," said Aennchen. "Ach! the fool a woman is to think that you Italians have any idea except self-interest when you, when you . . . talk nonsense to us. Go away, if you please. Good-evening." She dropped a curtsey with a surly coquetry, charming of its kind. Beppo protested that the room was dear to him because there first he had known for one blissful half-second the sweetness of her mouth.

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“Who told you that persons who don’t like your mistress are going to talk in there?” said Aennchen.

“You,” said Beppo.

Aennchen drew up in triumph: “And now will you pretend that you didn’t come up here to go in there to listen to what they say?”

Beppo clapped hands at her cleverness in trapping him. “Hush,” said all her limbs and features, belying the previous formal “good-evening.” He refused to be silent, thinking it a way of getting to the little antechamber. “Then, I tell you, downstairs you go,” said Aennchen stiffly.

“Is it decided?” Beppo asked. “Then, good-evening. You detestable German girls can’t love. One step—a smile: another step—a kiss. You tit-for-tat minx! Have you no notion of the sacredness of the sentiments which inspires me to petition that the place for our interview should be there where I tasted ecstatic joy for the space of a flash of lightning? I will go; but it is there that I will go, and I will await you there, signorina Aennchen. Yes, laugh at me! laugh at me!”

“No; really, I don’t laugh at you, signor Beppo,” said Aennchen, protesting in denial of what she was doing. “This way.”

“No, it’s that way,” said Beppo.

“It’s through here.” She opened a door. “The duchess has a reception to-night, and you can’t go round. Ach! you would not betray me?”

“Not if it were the duchess herself,” said Beppo; “he would refuse to satisfy man’s natural vanity, in such a case.”

Eager to advance to the little antechamber, he allowed Aennchen to wait behind him. He heard the door shut and a lock turn, and he was in the dark, and alone, left to take counsel of his fingers’ ends.

“She was born to it,” Beppo remarked, to extenuate his outwitted cunning, when he found each door of the room fast against him.

On the following night Vittoria was to sing at a concert in the Duchess of Graatli’s great saloon, and the duchess had humoured Pericles by consenting to his preposterous request that his spy should have an opportunity of hearing Countess d’Isorella and Irma di Karski in private conversation together, to discover whether there was any plot of any sort to vex the evening’s entertainment; as the jealous spite of those two women, Pericles said, was equal to any devilry on earth. It happened that Countess d’Isorella did not come. Luigi, in despair,—was the hearer of a quick question and answer

dialogue, in the obscure German tongue, between Anna von Lenkenstein and Irma di Karski; but a happy peep between the hanging curtains gave him sight of a letter passing from Anna's hands to Irma's. Anna quitted her. Irma, was looking at the superscription of the letter, an the act of passing in her steps, when Luigi tore the curtains apart, and sprang on her arm like a cat. Before her shrieks could bring succour, Luigi was bounding across the court with the letter in his possession.

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A dreadful hug awaited him; his pockets were ransacked, and he was pitched aching into the street. Jacob Baumwalder Feckelwitz went straightway under a gas-lamp, where he read the address of the letter to Countess d'Isorella. He doubted; he had a half-desire to tear the letter open. But a rumour of the attack upon Irma had spread among the domestics and Jacob prudently went up to his mistress. The duchess was sitting with Laura. She received the letter, eyed: it all over, and held it to a candle.

Laura's head was bent in dark meditation. The sudden increase of light aroused her, and she asked, "What is that?"

"A letter from Countess Anna to Countess d'Isorella," said the duchess.

"Burnt!" Laura screamed.

"It's only fair," the duchess remarked.

"From her to that woman! It may be priceless. Stop! Let me see what remains. Amalia! are you mad? Oh! you false friend. I would have sacrificed my right hand to see it."

"Try and love me still," said the duchess, letting her take one unburnt corner, and crumble the black tissuey fragments to smut in her hands.

There was no writing; the unburnt corner of the letter was a blank.

Laura fooled the wretched ashes between her palms. "Good-night," she said. "Your face will be of this colour to me, my dear, for long."

"I cannot behave disgracefully, even to keep your love, my beloved," said the duchess.

"You cannot betray a German, you mean," Laura retorted. "You could let a spy into the house."

"That was a childish matter—merely to satisfy a whim."

"I say you could let a spy into the house. Who is to know where the scruples of you women begin? I would have given my jewels, my head, my husband's sword, for a sight of that letter. I swear that it concerns us. Yes, us. You are a false friend. Fish-blooded creature! may it be a year before I look on you again. Hide among your miserable set!"

“Judge me when you are cooler, dearest,” said the duchess, seeking to detain the impetuous sister of her affection by the sweeping skirts; but Laura spurned her touch, and went from her.

Irma drove to Countess d’Isorella’s. Violetta was abed, and lay fair and placid as a Titian Venus, while Irma sputtered out her tale, with intermittent sobs. She rose upon her elbow, and planting it in her pillow, took half-a-dozen puffs of a cigarette, and then requested Irma to ring for her maid. “Do nothing till you see me again,” she said; “and take my advice: always get to bed before midnight, or you’ll have unmanageable wrinkles in a couple of years. If you had been in bed at a prudent hour to-night, this scandal would not have occurred.”

“How can I be in bed? How could I help it?” moaned Irma, replying to the abstract rule, and the perplexing illustration of its force.

Violetta dismissed her. “After all, my wish is to save my poor Amaranto,” she mused. “I am only doing now what I should have been doing in the daylight; and if I can’t stop him, the Government must; and they will. Whatever the letter contained, I can anticipate it. He knows my profession and my necessities. I must have money. Why not from the rich German woman whom he jilted?”

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She attributed Anna's apparent passion of revenge to a secret passion of unrequited love. What else was implied by her willingness to part with land and money for the key to his machinations?

Violetta would have understood a revenge directed against Angelo Guidascarpi, as the slayer of Anna's brother. But of him Anna had only inquired once, and carelessly, whether he was in Milan. Anna's mystical semi-patriotism—prompted by her hatred of Vittoria, hatred of Carlo as Angelo's cousin and protector, hatred of the Italy which held the three, who never took the name Tedesco on their tongues without loathing—was perfectly hidden from this shrewd head.

Some extra patrols were in the streets. As she stepped into the carriage, a man rushed up, speaking hoarsely and inarticulately, and jumped in beside her. She had discerned Barto Rizzo in time to give directions to her footman, before she was addressed by a body of gendarmes in pursuit, whom she mystified by entreating them to enter her house and search it through, if they supposed that any evil-doer had taken advantage of the open door. They informed her that a man had escaped from the civil prison. "Poor creature!" said the countess, with womanly pity; "but you must see that he is not in my house. How could three of you let one escape? "She drove off laughing at their vehement assertion that he would not have escaped from them. Barto Rizzo made her conduct him to Countess Ammiani's gates.

Violetta was frightened by his eyes when she tried to persuade him in her best coaxing manner to avoid Count Ammiani. In fact she apprehended that he would be very much in her way. She had no time for chagrin at her loss of power over him, though she was sensible of vexation. Barto folded his arms and sat with his head in his chest, silent, till they reached the' gates, when he said in French, "Madame, I am a nameless person in your train. Gabble!" he added, when the countess advised him not to enter; nor would he allow her to precede him by more than one step. Violetta sent up her name. The man had shaken her nerves. "At least, remember that your appearance should be decent," she said, catching sight of blood on his hands, and torn garments. "I expect, madame," he replied, "I shall not have time to wash before I am laid out. My time is short. I want tobacco. The washing can be done by-and-by, but not the smoking."

They were ushered up to the reception-room, where Countess Ammiani, Vittoria, and Carlo sat, awaiting the visitor whose unexpected name, cast in their midst at so troubled a season, had clothed her with some of the midnight's terrors.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE LAST MEETING IN MILAN

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Barto Rizzo had silence about him without having to ask for it, when he followed Violetta into Countess Ammiani's saloon of reception. Carlo was leaning over his mother's chair, holding Vittoria's wrist across it, and so enclosing her, while both young faces were raised to the bowed forehead of the countess. They stood up. Violetta broke through the formal superlatives of an Italian greeting. "Speak to me alone," she murmured for Carlo's ear and glancing at Barto: "Here is a madman; a mild one, I trust." She contrived to show that she was not responsible for his intrusion. Countess Ammiani gathered Vittoria in her arms; Carlo stepped a pace before them. Terror was on the venerable lady's face, wrath on her son's. As he fronted Barto, he motioned a finger to the curtain hangings, and Violetta, quick at reading signs, found his bare sword there. "But you will not want it," she remarked, handing the hilt to him, and softly eyeing the impression of her warm touch on the steel as it passed.

"Carlo, thou son of Paolo! Countess Marcellina, wife of a true patriot! stand aside, both of you. It is between the Countess Alessandra and myself," so the man commenced, with his usual pomp of interjection. "Swords and big eyes,—are they things to stop me?" Barto laughed scornfully. He had spoken in the full roll of his voice, and the sword was hard back for the thrust.

Vittoria disengaged herself from the countess. "Speak to me," she said, dismayed by the look of what seemed an exaltation of madness in Barto's visage, but firm as far as the trembling of her limbs would let her be.

He dropped to her feet and kissed them.

"Emilia Alessandra Belloni! Vittoria! Countess Alessandra Ammiani! pity me. Hear this: —I hated you as the devil is hated. Yesterday I woke up in prison to hear that I must adore you. God of all the pits of punishment! was there ever one like this? I had to change heads."

It was the language of a distorted mind, and lamentable to hear when a sob shattered his voice.

"Am I mad?" he asked piteously, clasping his temples.

"You are as we are, if you weep," said Vittoria, to sooth him.

"Then I have been mad!" he cried, starting. "I knew you a wicked virgin —signora contessa, confess to me, marriage has changed you. Has it not changed you? In the name of the Father of the Saints, help me out of it: —my brain reels backwards. You were false, but marriage—It acts in this way with you women; yes, that we know—you were married, and you said, 'Now let us be faithful.' Did you not say that? I am forgiving, though none think it. You have only to confess. If you will not,—oh!" He smote his face, groaning.

Carlo spoke a stern word in an undertone; counselling him to be gone.

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“If you will not—what was she to do?” Barto cut the question to interrogate his strayed wits. “Look at me, Countess Alessandra. I was in the prison. I heard that my Rosellina had a tight heart. She cried for her master, poor heathen, and I sprang out of the walls to her. There—there—she lay like a breathing board; a woman with a body like a coffin half alive; not an eye to show; nothing but a body and a whisper. She perished righteously, for she disobeyed. She acted without my orders: she dared to think! She will be damned, for she would have vengeance before she went. She glorified you over me—over Barto Rizzo. Oh! she shocked my soul. But she is dead, and I am her slave. Every word was of you. Take another head, Barto Rizzo your old one was mad: she said that to my soul. She died blessing you above me. I saw the last bit of life go up from her mouth blessing you. It’s heard by this time in heaven, and it’s written. Then I have had two years of madness. If she is right, I was wrong; I was a devil of hell. I know there’s an eye given to dying creatures, and she looked with it, and she said, the soul of Rinaldo Guidascarpi, her angel, was glorifying you; and she thanked the sticking of her heart, when she tried to stab you, poor fool!”

Carlo interrupted: “Now go; you have said enough.”

“No, let him speak,” said Vittoria. She supposed that Barto was going to say that he had not given the order for her assassination. “You do not wish me dead, signore?”

“Nothing that is not standing in my way, signora contessa,” said Barto; and his features blazed with a smile of happy self-justification. “I have killed a sentinel this night: Providence placed him there. I wish for no death, but I punish, and—ah! the cursed sight of the woman who calls me mad for two years. She thrusts a bar of iron in an engine at work, and says, Work on! work on! Were you not a traitress? Countess Alessandra, were you not once a traitress? Oh! confess it; save my head. Reflect, dear lady! it’s cruel to make a man of a saintly sincerity look back—I count the months—-seventeen months! to look back seventeen months, and see that his tongue was a clapper,—his will, his eyes, his ears, all about him, everything, stirred like a pot on the fire. I traced you. I saw your treachery. I said—I, I am her Day of Judgement. She shall look on me and perish, struck down by her own treachery. Were my senses false to me? I had lived in virtuous fidelity to my principles. None can accuse me. Why were my senses false, if my principles were true? I said you were a traitress. I saw it from the first. I had the divine contempt for women. My distrust of a woman was the eye of this brain, and I said—Follow her, dog her, find her out! I proved her false; but her devilish cunning deceived every other man in the world. Oh! let me bellow, for it’s me she proves the mass of corruption! Tomorrow I die, and if I am mad now, what sort of a curse is that?

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“Now to-morrow is an hour—a laugh! But if I’ve not been shot from a true bow—if I’ve been a sham for two years—if my name, and nature, bones, brains, were all false things hunting a shadow, Countess Alessandra, see the misery of Barto Rizzo! Look at those two years, and say that I had my head. Answer me, as you love your husband: are you heart and soul with him in the fresh fight for Lombardy?” He said this with a look penetrating and malignant, and then by a sudden flash pitifully entreating.

Carlo feared to provoke, revolted from the thought of slaying him. “Yes, yes,” he interposed, “my wife is heart and soul in it. Go.”

Barto looked from him to her with the eyes of a dog that awaits an order.

Victoria gathered her strength, and said: “I am not.”

“It is her answer!” Barto roared, and from deep dejection his whole countenance radiated. “She says it—she might give the lie to a saint! I was never mad. I saw the spot, and put my finger on it, and not a madman can do that. My two years are my own. Mad now, for, see!

“I worship the creature. She is not heart and soul in it. She is not in it at all. She is a little woman, a lovely thing, a toy, a cantatrice. Joy to the big heart of Barto Rizzo! I am for Brescia!”

He flung his arm like a banner, and ran out.

Carlo laid his sword on a table. Vittoria’s head was on his mother’s bosom.

The hour was too full of imminent grief for either of the three to regard this scene as other than a gross intrusion ended.

“Why did you deny my words?” Carlo said coldly.

“I could not lie to make him wretched,” she replied in a low murmur.

“Do you know what that ‘I am for Brescia’ means? He goes to stir the city before a soul is ready.”

“I warned you that I should speak the truth of myself to-night, dearest.”

“You should discern between speaking truth to a madman, and to a man.”

Vittoria did not lift her eyes, and Carlo beckoned to Violetta, with whom he left the room.

“He is angry,” Countess Ammiani murmured. “My child, you cannot deal with men in a fever unless you learn to dissemble; and there is exemption for doing it, both in plain

sense, and in our religion. If I could arrest him, I would speak boldly. It is, alas! vain to dream of that; and it is therefore an unkindness to cause him irritation. Carlo has given way to you by allowing you to be here when his friends assemble. He knows your intention to speak. He has done more than would have been permitted by my husband to me, though I too was well-beloved."

Vittoria continued silent that her head might be cherished where it lay. She was roused from a stupor by hearing new voices. Laura's lips came pressing to her cheek. Colonel Corte, Agostino, Marco Sana, and Angelo Guidascarpi, saluted her. Angelo she kissed.

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“That lady should be abed and asleep,” Corte was heard to say.

The remark passed without notice. Angelo talked apart with Vittoria. He had seen the dying of the woman whose hand had been checked in the act of striking by the very passion of animal hatred which raised it. He spoke of her affectionately, attesting to the fact that Barto Rizzo had not prompted her guilt. Vittoria moaned at a short outline that he gave of the last minutes between those two, in which her name was dreadfully and fatally, incomprehensibly prominent.

All were waiting impatiently for Carlo’s return.

When he appeared he informed his mother that the Countess d’Isorella would remain in the house that night, and his mother passed out to her abhorred guest, who, for the time at least, could not be doing further mischief.

It was a meeting for the final disposition of things before the outbreak. Carlo had begun to speak when Corte drew his attention to the fact that ladies were present, at which Carlo put out his hand as if introducing them, and went on speaking.

“Your wife is here,” said Corte.

“My wife and signora Piaveni,” Carlo rejoined. “I have consented to my wife’s particular wish to be present.”

“The signora Piaveni’s opinions are known: your wife’s are not.”

“Countess Alessandra shares mine,” said Laura, rather tremulously.

Countess Ammiani at the same time returned and took Vittoria’s hand and pressed it with force. Carlo looked at them both.

“I have to ask your excuses, gentlemen. My wife, my mother, and signora Piaveni, have served the cause we worship sufficiently to claim a right— I am sorry to use such phrases; you understand my meaning. Permit them to remain. I have to tell you that Barto Rizzo has been here: he has started for Brescia. I should have had to kill him to stop him—a measure that I did not undertake.”

“Being your duty!” remarked Corte.

Agostino corrected him with a sarcasm.

“I cannot allow the presence of ladies to exclude a comment on manifest indifference,” said Corte. “Pass on to the details, if you have any.”

“The details are these,” Carlo resumed, too proud to show a shade of self-command; “my cousin Angelo leaves Milan before morning. You, Colonel Corte, will be in Bergamo at noon to-morrow. Marco and Angelo will await my coming in Brescia, where we shall find Giulio and the rest. I join them at five on the following afternoon, and my arrival signals the revolt. We have decided that the news from the king’s army is good.”

A perceptible shudder in Vittoria’s frame at this concluding sentence caught Corte’s eye.

“Are you dissatisfied with that arrangement?” he addressed her boldly.

“I am, Colonel Corte,” she replied. So simple was the answering tone of her voice that Corte had not a word.

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“It is my husband who is going,” Vittoria spoke on steadily; “him I am prepared to sacrifice, as I am myself. If he thinks it right to throw himself into Brescia, nothing is left for me but to thank him for having done me the honour to consult me. His will is firm. I trust to God that he is wise. I look on him now as one of many brave men whose lives belong to Italy, and if they all are misdirected and perish, we have no more; we are lost. The king is on the Ticino; the Chief is in Rome. I desire to entreat you to take counsel before you act in anticipation of the king’s fortune. I see that it is a crushed life in Lombardy. In Rome there is one who can lead and govern. He has suffered and is calm. He calls to you to strengthen his hands. My prayer to you is to take counsel. I know the hour is late; but it is not too late for wisdom. Forgive me if I am not speaking humbly. Brescia is but Brescia; Rome is Italy. I have understood little of my country until these last days, though I have both talked and sung of her glories. I know that a deep duty binds you to Bergamo and to Brescia—poor Milan we must not think of. You are not personally pledged to Rome: yet Rome may have the greatest claims on you. The heart of our country is beginning to beat there. Colonel Corte! signor Marco! my Agostino! my cousin Angelo! it is not a woman asking for the safety of her husband, but one of the blood of Italy who begs to offer you her voice, without seeking to disturb your judgement.”

She ceased.

“Without seeking to disturb their judgement!” cried Laura. “Why not, when the judgement is in error?”

To Laura’s fiery temperament Vittoria’s speech had been feebleness. She was insensible to that which the men felt conveyed to them by the absence of emotion in the language of a woman so sorrowfully placed. “Wait,” she said, “wait for the news from Carlo Alberto, if you determine to play at swords and guns in narrow streets.” She spoke long and vehemently, using irony, coarse and fine, with the eloquence which was her gift. In conclusion she apostrophized Colonel Corte as one who had loved him might have done. He was indeed that figure of indomitable strength to which her spirit, exhausted by intensity of passion, clung more than to any other on earth, though she did not love him, scarcely liked him.

Corte asked her curiously—for she had surprised and vexed his softer side—why she distinguished him with such remarkable phrases only to declare her contempt for him.

“It’s the flag whipping the flag-pole,” murmured Agostino; and he now spoke briefly in support of the expedition to Rome; or at least in favour of delay until the King of Sardinia had gained a battle. While he was speaking, Merthyr entered the room, and behind him a messenger who brought word that Bergamo had risen.

The men drew hurriedly together, and Countess Ammiani, Vittoria and Laura stood ready to leave them.

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“You will give me, five minutes?” Vittoria whispered to her husband, and he nodded.

“Merthyr,” she said, passing him, “can I have your word that you will not go from me?”

Merthyr gave her his word after he had looked on her face.

“Send to me every two hours, that I may know you are near,” she added; “do not fear waking me. Or, no, dear friend; why should I have any concealment from you? Be not a moment absent, if you would not have me fall to the ground a second time: follow me.”

Even as he hesitated, for he had urgent stuff to communicate to Carlo, he could see a dreadful whiteness rising on her face, darkening the circles of her eyes.

“It’s life or death, my dearest, and I am bound to live,” she said. Her voice sprang up from tears.

Merthyr turned and tried in vain to get a hearing among the excited, voluble men. They shook his hand, patted his shoulder, and counselled him to leave them. He obtained Carlo’s promise that he would not quit the house without granting him an interview; after which he passed out to Vittoria, where Countess Ammiani and Laura sat weeping by the door.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE WIFE AND THE HUSBAND

When they were alone Merthyr said: “I cannot give many minutes, not much time. I have to speak to your husband.”

She answered: “Give me many minutes—much time. All other speaking is vain here.”

“It concerns his safety.”

“It will not save him.”

“But I have evidence that he is betrayed. His plans are known; a trap is set for him. If he moves, he walks into a pit.”

“You would talk reason, Merthyr,” Vittoria sighed. “Talk it to me. I can listen; I thirst for it. I beat at the bars of a cage all day. When I saw you this afternoon, I looked on another life. It was too sudden, and I swooned. That was my only show of weakness. Since then you are the only strength I feel.”

“Have they all become Barto Rizzos?” Merthyr exclaimed.

“Beloved, I will open my mind to you,” said Vittoria. “I am cowardly, and I thought I had such courage! Tonight a poor mad creature has been here, who has oppressed me, I cannot say how long, with real fear—that I only understand now that I know the little ground I had for it. I am even pleased that one like Barto Rizzo should see me in a better light. I find the thought smiling in my heart when every other thing is utterly dark there. You have heard that Carlo goes to Brescia. When I was married, I lost sight of Italy, and everything but happiness. I suffer as I deserve for it now. I could have turned my husband from this black path; I preferred to dream and sing. I would not see—it was my pride that would not let me see his error. My cowardice would not let me wound him with a single suggestion. You say that he is betrayed.

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Then he is betrayed by the woman who has never been unintelligible to me. We were in Turin surrounded by intrigues, and there I thanked her so much for leaving me the days with my husband by Lake Orta that I did not seek to open his eyes to her. We came to Milan, and here I have been thanking her for the happy days in Turin. Carlo is no longer to blame if he will not listen to me. I have helped to teach him that I am no better than any of these Italian women whom he despises. I spoke to him as his wife should do, at last. He feigned to think me jealous, and I too remember the words of the reproach, as if they had a meaning. Ah, my friend! I would say of nothing that it is impossible, except this task of recovering lost ground with one who is young. Experience of trouble has made me older than he. When he accused me of jealousy, I could mention Countess d'Isorella's name no more. I confess to that. Yet I knew my husband feigned. I knew that he could not conceive the idea of jealousy existing in me, as little as I could imagine unfaithfulness in him. But my lips would not take her name! Wretched cowardice cannot go farther. I spoke of Rome. As often as I spoke, that name was enough to shake me off: he had but to utter it, and I became dumb. He did it to obtain peace; for no other cause. So, by degrees, I have learnt the fatal truth. He has trusted her, for she is very skilful; distrusting her, for she is treacherous. He has, therefore, believed excessively in his ability to make use of her, and to counteract her baseness. I saw his error from the first; and I went on dreaming and singing; and now this night has come!"

Vittoria shadowed her eyes.

"I will go to him at once," said Merthyr.

"Yes; I am relieved. Go, dear friend," she sobbed; "you have given me tears, as I hoped. You will not turn him; had it been possible, could I have kept you from him so long? I know that you will not turn him from his purpose, for I know what a weight it is that presses him forward in that path. Do not imagine our love to be broken. He will convince you that it is not. He has the nature of an angel. He permitted me to speak before these men to-night—feeble thing that I am! It was a last effort. I might as well have tried to push a rock."

She rose at a noise of voices in the hall below.

"They are going, Merthyr. See him now. There may be help in heaven; if one could think it! If help were given to this country—if help were only visible! The want of it makes us all without faith."

"Hush! you may hear good news from Carlo Alberto in a few hours," said Merthyr.

"Ask Laura; she has witnessed how he can be shattered," Vittoria replied bitterly.

Merthyr pressed her fingers. He was met by Carlo on the stairs.

“Quick!” Carlo said; “I have scarce a minute to spare. I have my adieux to make, and the tears have set in already. First, a request: you will promise to remain beside my wife; she will want more than her own strength.”

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Such a request, coming from an Italian husband, was so great a proof of the noble character of his love and his knowledge of the woman he loved, that Merthyr took him in his arms and kissed him.

“Get it over quickly, dear good fellow,” Carlo murmured; “you have something to tell me. Whatever it is, it’s air; but I’ll listen.”

They passed into a vacant room. “You know you are betrayed,” Merthyr began.

“Not exactly that,” said Carlo, humming carelessly.

“Positively and absolutely. The Countess d’Isorella has sold your secrets.”

“I commend her to the profit she has made by it.”

“Do you play with your life?”

Carlo was about to answer in the tone he had assumed for the interview. He checked the laugh on his lips.

“She must have some regard for my life, such as it’s worth, since, to tell you the truth, she is in the house now, and came here to give me fair warning.”

“Then, you trust her.”

“I? Not a single woman in the world!—that is, for a conspiracy.”

It was an utterly fatuous piece of speech. Merthyr allowed it to slip, and studied him to see where he was vulnerable.

“She is in the house, you say. Will you cause her to come before me?”

“Curiously,” said Carlo, “I kept her for some purpose of the sort. Will I? and have a scandal now? Oh! no. Let her sleep.”

Whether he spoke from noble-mindedness or indifference, Merthyr could not guess.

“I have a message from your friend Luciano. He sends you his love, in case he should be shot the first, and says that when Lombardy is free he hopes you will not forget old comrades who are in Rome.”

“Forget him! I would to God I could sit and talk of him for hours. Luciano! Luciano! He has no wife.”

Carlo spoke on hoarsely. “Tell me what authority you have for charging Countess d’Isorella with . . . with whatever it may be.”

“A conversation between Countess Anna of Lenkenstein and a Major Nagen, in the Duchess of Graatli’s house, was overheard by our Beppo. They spoke German. The rascal had a German sweetheart with him. She imprisoned him for some trespass, and had come stealing in to rescue him, when those two entered the room. Countess Anna detailed to Nagen the course of your recent plotting. She named the hour this morning when you are to start for Brescia. She stated what force you have, what arms you expect; she named you all.”

“Nagen—Nagen,” Carlo repeated; “the man’s unknown to me.”

“It’s sufficient that he is an Austrian officer.”

“Quite. She hates me, and she has reason, for she’s aware that I mean to fight her lover, and choose my time. The blood of my friends is on that man’s head.”

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“I will finish what I have to say,” pursued Merthyr. “When Beppo had related as much as he could make out from his sweetheart’s translation, I went straight to the duchess. She is an Austrian, and a good and reasonable woman. She informed me that a letter addressed by Countess Anna to Countess d’Isorella fell into her hands this night. She burnt it unopened. I leave it to you to consider whether you have been betrayed and who has betrayed you. The secret was bought. Beppo himself caught the words, ‘from a mercenary Italian.’ The duchess tells me that Countess Anna is in the habit of alluding to Countess d’Isorella in those terms.”

Carlo stretched his arms like a man who cannot hide the yawning fit.

“I promised my wife five minutes, though we have had the worst of the parting over. Perhaps you will wait for me; I may have a word to say.”

He was absent for little more than the space named. When he returned, he was careful to hide his face. He locked the door, and leading Merthyr to an inner room, laid his watch on the table, and said: “Now, friend, you will see that I have nothing to shrink from, for I am going to do execution upon myself, and before him whom I would, above all other men, have think well of me. My wife supposes that I am pledged to this Brescian business because I am insanely patriotic. If I might join Luciano tomorrow I would shout like a boy. I would be content to serve as the lowest in the ranks, if I might be with you all under the Chief. Rome crowns him, and Brescia is my bloody ditch, and it is deserved! When I was a little younger—I am a boy still, no doubt—I had the honour to be distinguished by a handsome woman; and when I grew a little older, I discovered by chance that she had wit. The lady is the Countess Violetta d’Isorella. It is a grief to me to know that she is sordid: it hurts my vanity the more. Perhaps: you begin to perceive that vanity governs me. The signora Laura has not expressed her opinion on this subject with any reserve, but to Violetta belongs the merit of having seen it without waiting for the signs. First—it is a small matter, but you are English—let me assure you that my wife has had no rival. I have taunted her with jealousy when I knew that it was neither in her nature to feel it, nor in mine to give reason for it. No man who has a spark of his Maker in him could be unfaithful to such a woman. When Lombardy was crushed, we were in the dust. I fancy we none of us knew how miserably we had fallen—we, as men. The purest—I dare say, the bravest—marched to Rome. God bless my Luciano there! But I, sir, I, my friend, I, Merthyr, I said proudly that I would not abandon a beaten country: and I was admired for my devotion. The dear old poet, Agostino, praised me. It stopped his epigrams—during a certain time, at least. Colonel Corte admired me. Marco Sana, Giulio Bandinelli admired me. Vast numbers admired me. I need not add that

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I admired myself. I plunged into intrigues with princes, and priests, and republicans. A clever woman was at my elbow. In the midst of all this, my marriage: I had seven weeks of peace; and then I saw what I was. You feel that you are tired, when you want to go another way and you feel that you have been mad when you want to undo your work. But I could not break the chains I had wrought, for I was a chief of followers. The men had come from exile, or they had refused to join the Roman enterprise:—they, in fact, had bound themselves to me; and that means, I was irrevocably bound to them. I had an insult to wipe out: I refrained from doing it, sincerely, I may tell you, on the ground that this admired life of mine was precious. I will heap no more clumsy irony on it: I can pity it. Do you see now how I stand? I know that I cannot rely on the king's luck or on the skill of his generals, or on the power of his army, or on the spirit in Lombardy: neither on men nor on angels. But I cannot draw back. I have set going a machine that's merciless. From the day it began working, every moment has added to its force. Do not judge me by your English eyes: other lands, other habits; other habits, other thoughts. And besides, if honour said nothing, simple humanity would preserve me from leaving my band to perish like a flock of sheep."

He uttered this with a profound conviction of his quality as leader, that escaped the lurid play of self-inspection which characterized what he had previously spoken, and served singularly in bearing witness to the truth of his charge against himself.

"Useless!" he said, waving his hand at anticipated remonstrances. "Look with the eyes of my country; not with your own, my friend. I am disgraced if I do not go out. My friends are disgraced if I do not head them in. Brescia—sacrificed!—murdered!—how can I say what? Can I live under disgrace or remorse? The king stakes on his army; I on the king. Whether he fights and wins, or fights and loses, I go out. I have promised my men—promised them success, I believe!—God forgive me! Did you ever see a fated man before? None had plotted against me. I have woven my own web, and that's the fatal thing. I have a wife, the sweetest woman of her time. Goodnight to her! our parting is over."

He glanced at his watch. "Perhaps she will be at the door below. Her heart beats like mine just now. You wish to say that you think me betrayed, and therefore I may draw back? Did you not hear that Bergamo has risen? The Brescians are up too by this time. Gallant Brescians! they never belie the proverb in their honour; and to die among them would be sweet if I had all my manhood about me. You would have me making a scene with Violetta."

"Set the woman face to face with me!" cried Merthyr, sighting a gleam of hope.

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Carlo smiled. “Can she bear my burden though she be ten times guilty? Let her sleep. I have her here harmless for the night. The Brescians are up:—that’s an hour that has struck, and there’s no calling it to move a step in the rear. Brescia under the big Eastern hill which throws a cloak on it at sunrise! Brescia is always the eagle that looks over Lombardy! And Bergamo! you know the terraces of Bergamo. Aren’t they like a morning sky? Dying there is not death; it’s flying into the dawn. You Romans envy us. Come, confess it; you envy us. You have no Alps, no crimson hills, nothing but old walls to look on while you fight. Farewell, Merthyr Powys. I hear my servant’s foot outside. My horse is awaiting me saddled, a mile from the city. Perhaps I shall see my wife again at the door below, or in heaven. Addio! Kiss Luciano for me. Tell him that I knew myself as well as he did, before the end came. Enrico, Emilio, and the others—tell them I love them. I doubt if there will ever be but a ghost of me to fight beside them in Rome. And there’s no honour, Merthyr, in a ghost’s fighting, because he’s shotproof; so I won’t say what the valiant disembodied ‘I’ may do by-and-by.”

He held his hands out, with the light soft smile of one who asks forgiveness for flippant speech, and concluded firmly: “I have talked enough, and you are the man of sense I thought you; for to give me advice is childish when no power on earth could make me follow it. Addio! Kiss me.”

They embraced. Merthyr said no more than that he would place messengers on the road to Brescia to carry news of the king’s army. His voice was thick, and when Carlo laughed at him, his sensations strangely reversed their situations.

There were two cloaked figures at different points in the descent of the stairs. These rose severally at Carlo’s approach, took him to their bosoms, and kissed him in silence. They were his mother and Laura. A third crouched by the door of the courtyard, which was his wife.

Merthyr kept aloof until the heavy door rolled a long dull sound. Vittoria’s head was shawled over. She stood where her husband had left her, groping for him with one hand, that closed tremblingly hard on Merthyr when he touched it. Not a word was uttered in the house.

CHAPTER XLV

SHOWS MANY PATHS CONVERGING TO THE END

Until daylight Merthyr sat by himself, trying to realize the progressive steps of the destiny which seemed like a visible hand upon Count Ammiani, that he might know it to be nothing else than Carlo’s work. He sat in darkness in the room where Carlo had spoken, thinking of him as living and dead. The brilliant life in Carlo protested against a possible fatal tendency in his acts so irrevocable as to plunge him to destruction when

his head was clear, his blood cool, and a choice lay open to him. That brilliant young life,

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that fine face, the tones of Carlo's voice, swept about Merthyr, accusing him of stupid fatalism. Grief stopped his answer to the charge; but in his wise mind he knew Carlo to have surveyed things justly; and that the Fates are within us. Those which are the forces of the outer world are as shadows to the power we have created within us. He felt this because it was his gathered wisdom. Human compassion, and love for the unhappy youth, crushed it in his heart, and he marvelled how he could have been paralyzed when he had a chance of interceding. Can a man stay a torrent? But a noble and fair young life in peril will not allow our philosophy to liken it to things of nature. The downward course of a fall that takes many waters till it rushes irresistibly is not the course of any life. Yet it is true that our destiny is of our own weaving. Carlo's involvements cast him into extreme peril, almost certain death, unless he abjured his honour, dearer than a life made precious by love. Merthyr saw that it was not vanity, but honour; for Carlo stood pledged to lead a forlorn enterprise, the ripeness of his own scheming. In the imminent hour Carlo had recognized his position as Merthyr with the wisdom of years looked on it. That was what had paralyzed the older man, though he could not subsequently trace the cause. Thinking of the beauty of the youth, husband of the woman who was to his soul utterly an angel, Merthyr sat in the anguish of self-accusation, believing that some remonstrance, some inspired word, might have turned him, and half dreading to sound his own heart, as if an evil knowledge of his nature haunted it.

He rose up at last with a cry. The door opened, and Giacinta, Vittoria's maid, appeared, bearing a lamp. She had been sitting outside, waiting to hear him stir before she intruded. He touched her cheek kindly, and thought that one could do little better than die, if need were, in the service of such a people. She said that her mistress was kneeling. She wished to make coffee for him, and Merthyr let her do it, knowing the comfort there is to a woman in the ministering occupation of her hands. It was soon daylight. Beppo had not come back to the house.

"No one has left the house?" Merthyr asked.

"Not since—" she answered convulsively.

"The Countess d'Isorella is here?"

"Yes, signore."

"Asleep?" he put the question mournfully, in remembrance of Carlo's "Let her sleep!"

"Yes, signore; like the first night after confession."

“She resides, I think, in the Corso Venezia. When she awakens, let her know that I request to have the honour of conducting her.”

“Yes, signore. Her carriage is still at the gates. The countess’s horses are accustomed to stand.”

Merthyr knew this for a hint against his leaving, as well as against the lady’s character.

“Let your mistress be assured that I shall on no account be long absent at any time.”

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“Signore, I shall do so,” said Giacinta.

She brought him word soon after, that Countess d’Isorella was stirring. Merthyr met Violetta on the stairs.

“Can it be true?” she accosted him first.

“Count Ammiani has left for Brescia,” he replied.

“In spite of my warning?”

Merthyr gave space for her to pass into the room. She appeared undecided, saying that she had a dismal apprehension of her not having dismissed her coachman overnight.

“In spite of my warning,” she murmured again, “he has really gone? Surely I cannot have slept more than three hours.”

“It was Count Ammiani’s wish that you should enjoy your full sleep undisturbed in his house,” said Merthyr, “As regards your warning to him, he has left Milan perfectly convinced of the gravity of a warning that comes from you.”

Violetta shrugged lightly. “Then all we have to do is to pray for the success of Carlo Alberto.”

“Oh! pardon me, countess,” Merthyr rejoined, “prayers may be useful, but you at least have something to do besides.”

His eyes caught hers firmly as they were letting a wild look of interrogation fall on him, and he continued with perfect courtesy, “You will accompany me to see Countess Anna of Lenkenstein. You have great influence, madame. It is not Count Ammiani’s request; for, as I informed you, it was his wish that you should enjoy your repose. The request is mine, because his life is dear to me. Nagen, I think, is the name of the Austrian officer who has started for Brescia.”

She had in self-defence to express surprise while he spoke, which compelled her to meet his mastering sight and submit to a struggle of vision sufficient to show him that he had hit a sort of guilty consciousness. Otherwise she was not discomposed, and with marvellous sagacity she accepted the forbearance he assumed, not affecting innocence to challenge it, as silly criminals always do when they are exposed, but answering quite in the tone of innocence, and so throwing the burden by an appearance of mutual consent on some unnamed third person.

“Certainly; let us go to Countess Anna of Lenkenstein, if you think fit. I have to rely on your judgement. I quite abjure my own. If I have to plead for anything, I am going before a woman, remember.”

“I do not forget it,” said Merthyr.

“The expedition to Brescia may be unfortunate,” she resumed hurriedly; “I wish it had not been undertaken. At any rate, it rescues Count Ammiani from an expedition to Rome, and his slavish devotion to that priest-hating man whom he calls, or called, his Chief. At Brescia he is not outraging the head of our religion. That is a gain.”

“A gain for him in the next world?” said Merthyr. “I believe that Countess Anna of Lenkenstein is also a fervent Catholic; is she not?”

“I trust so.”

“On behalf of her peace of mind, I trust so, too. In that case, she also must be a sound sleeper.”

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“We shall have to awaken her. What excuse—what am I to say to her?”

“I beg you to wait for the occasion, Countess d’Isorella. The words will come.”

Violetta bit her lip. She had consented to this extraordinary step in an amazement. As she contemplated it now, it seemed worse than a partial confession and an appeal to his generosity. She broke out in pity for her horses, in dread of her coachman, declaring that it was impossible for her to give him the order to drive her anywhere but home.

“With your permission, countess, I will undertake to give him the order,” said Merthyr.

“But have you no compassion, signor Powys? and you are an Englishman! I thought that Englishmen were excessively compassionate with horses.”

“They have been known to kill them in the service of their friends, nevertheless.”

“Well!”—Violetta had recourse to the expression of her shoulders— “and I am really to see Countess Anna?”

“In my presence.”

“Oh! that cannot be. Pardon me; it is impossible. She will decline the scene. I say it with the utmost sincerity: I know that she will refuse.”

“Then, countess,” Merthyr’s face grew hard, “if I am not to be in your company to prompt you, allow me to instruct you beforehand.”

Violetta looked at him eagerly, as one looks for tidings, with an involuntary beseeching quiver of the strained eyelids.

“No irony!” she said, fearing horribly that he was about to throw off the mask of irony.

This desperate effort of her wits at the crisis succeeded.

Merthyr, not knowing what design he had, hopeless of any definite end in tormenting the woman, and never having it in his mind merely to punish, was diverted by the exclamation to speak ironically. “You can tell Countess Anna that it is only her temporal sovereign who is attacked, and that therefore—” he could not continue.

“Some affection?” he murmured, in intense grief.

His manly forbearance touched her whose moral wit was too blunt to apprehend the contempt in it.

“Much affection—much!” Violetta exclaimed. “I have a deep affection for Count Ammiani; an old friendship. Believe me! believe me! I came here last night to save him. Anything on earth that I can do, I will do —on my honour; and do not smile at that —I have never pledged it without fulfilling the oath. I will not sleep while I can aid in preserving him. He shall know that I am not the base person he has conceived me to be. You, signor Powys, are not a man to paint all women black that are a little less than celestial—are you? I am told it is a trick with your, countrymen; and they have a poet who knew us! I entreat you to confide in me. I am at present quite unaware that Count Ammiani runs particular —I mean personal danger. He is in danger, of course; everyone can see it. But, on my honour—and never in my life have I spoken so earnestly, my friends would hardly recognize me—I declare to you on my faith as a Christian lady, I am ignorant of any plot against him. I can take a Cross and kiss it, like a peasant, and swear to you by the Madonna that I know nothing of it.”

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She corrected her ardour, half-exulting in finding herself carried so far and so swimmingly on a tide of truth, half wondering whether the flowering beauty of her face in excitement had struck his sensibility. He was cold and speculative.

“Ah!” she said, “if I were to ask my compatriots to put faith in a woman’s pure friendship for a man, I should know the answer; but you, signor Powys, who have shown us that a man is capable of the purest friendship for a woman, should believe me.”

He led her down to the gates, where her coachman sat muffled in a three-quarter sleep. The word was given to drive to her own house; rejoiced by which she called his attention deploringly to the condition of her horses, requesting him to say whether he could imagine them the best English, and confessing with regret, that she killed three sets a year— loved them well, notwithstanding. Merthyr saw enough of her to feel that she was one of the weak creatures who are strong through our greater weakness; and, either by intuition or quick wit, too lively and too subtle to be caught by simple suspicion. She even divined that reflection might tell him she had evaded him by an artifice—a piece of gross cajolery; and said, laughing: “Concerning friendship, I could offer it to a boy, like Carlo Ammiani; not to you, signor Powys. I know that I must check a youth, and I am on my guard. I should be eternally tormented to discover whether your armour was proof.”

“I dare say that a lady who had those torments would soon be able to make them mine,” said Merthyr.

“You could not pay a fairer compliment to some one else,” she remarked. In truth, the candid personal avowal seemed to her to hold up Vittoria’s sacred honour in a crystal, and the more she thought of it, the more she respected him, for his shrewd intelligence, if not for his sincerity; but on the whole she fancied him a loyal friend, not solely a clever maker of phrases; and she was pleased with herself for thinking such a matter possible, in spite of her education.

“I do most solemnly hope that you may not have to sustain Countess Alessandra under any affliction whatsoever,” she said at parting.

Violetta had escaped an exposure—a rank and naked accusation of her character and deeds. She feared nothing but that, being quite indifferent to opinion; a woman who would not have thought it preternaturally sad to have to walk as a penitent in the streets, with the provision of a very thick veil to cover her. She had escaped, but the moment she felt herself free, she was surprised by a sharp twinge of remorse. She summoned her maid to undress her, and smelt her favourite perfume, and lay in her bed, to complete her period of rest, closing her eyes there with a child’s faith in pillows. Flying lights and blood-blotches rushed within a span of her forehead. She met this symptom promptly with a medical receipt; yet she had no sleep; nor would coffee give her sleep.

She shrank from opium as deleterious to the constitution, and her mind settled on music as the remedy.

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Some time after her craving for it had commenced, an Austrian foot regiment, marching to the drum, passed under her windows. The fife is a merry instrument; fife and drum colour the images of battle gaily; but the dull ringing Austrian step-drum, beating unaccompanied, strikes the mind with the real nature of battles, as the salt smell of powder strikes it, and more in horror, more as a child's imagination realizes bloodshed, where the scene is a rolling heaven, black and red on all sides, with pitiable men moving up to the mouth of butchery, the insufferable flashes, the dark illumination of red, red of black, like a vision of the shadows Life and Death in a shadow-fight over the dear men still living. Sensitive minds may be excited by a small stimulant to see such pictures. This regimental drum is like a song of the flat-headed savage in man. It has no rise or fall, but leads to the bloody business with an unvarying note, and a savage's dance in the middle of the rhythm. Violetta listened to it until her heart quickened with alarm lest she should be going to have a fever. She thought of Carlo Ammiani, and of the name of Nagen; she had seen him at the Lenkensteins. Her instant supposition was that Anna had perhaps paid heavily for the secret of Carlo's movements an purpose to place Major Nagen on the Brescian high-road to capture him. Capture meant a long imprisonment, if not execution. Partly for the sake of getting peace of mind—for she was shocked by her temporary inability to command repose—but with some hope of convincing Carlo that she strove to be of use to him, she sent for the spy Luigi, and at a cost of two hundred and twenty Austrian florins, obtained his promise upon oath to follow Count Ammiani into Brescia, if necessary, and deliver to him a letter she had written, wherein Nagen's name was mentioned, and Carlo was advised to avoid personal risks; the letter hinted that he might have incurred a private enmity, and he had better keep among his friends. She knew the writing of this letter to be the foolishest thing she had ever done. Two hundred and twenty florins—the man originally stipulated to have three hundred—was a large sum to pay for postage. However, sacrifices must now and then be made for friendship, and for sleep. When she had paid half the money, her mind was relieved, and she had the slumber which preserves beauty. Luigi was to be paid the other half on his return. "He may never return," she thought, while graciously dismissing him. The deduction by mental arithmetic of the two hundred and twenty, or the one hundred and ten florins, from the large amount Countess Anna was bound to pay her in turn, annoyed her, though she knew it was a trifle. For this lady, Milan, Turin, and Paris sighed deeply.

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When he had left Violetta at her house in the Corso, Merthyr walked briskly for exercise, knowing that he would have need of his health and strength. He wanted a sight of Alps to wash out the image of the woman from his mind, and passed the old Marshal's habitation fronting the Gardens, wishing that he stood in the field against the fine old warrior, for whom he had a liking. Near the walls he discovered Beppo sitting pensively with his head between his two fists. Beppo had not seen Count Ammiani, but he had seen Barto Rizzo, and pointing to the walls, said that Barto had dropped down there. He had met him hurrying in the Corso Francesco. Barto took him to the house of Sarpo, the bookseller, who possessed a small printing-press. Beppo described vividly, with his usual vivacity of illustration, the stupefaction of the man at the apparition of his tormentor, whom he thought fast in prison; and how Barto had compelled him to print a proclamation to the Piedmontese, Lombards, and Venetians, setting forth that a battle had been fought South of the Ticino, and that Carlo Alberto was advancing on Milan, signed with the name of the Piedmontese Pole in command of the king's army. A second, framed as an order of the day, spoke of victory and the planting of the green, white and red banner on the Adige, and forward to the Isonzo.

"I can hear nothing of Carlo Alberto's victory," Beppo said; "no one has heard of it. Barto told us how the battle was fought, and the name of the young lieutenant who discovered the enemy's flank march, and got the artillery down on him, and pounded him so that—-signore, it's amazing! I'm ready to cry, and laugh, and howl!—fifteen thousand men capitulated in a heap!"

"Don't you know you've been listening to a madman?" said Merthyr, irritated, and thoroughly angered to see Beppo's opposition to that view.

"Signore, Barto described the whole battle. It began at five o'clock in the morning."

"When it was dark!"

"Yes; when it was dark. He said so. And we sent up rockets, and caught the enemy coming on, and the cavalry of Alessandria fell upon two batteries of field guns and carried them off, and Colonel Romboni was shot in his back, and cries he, 'Best give up the ghost if you're hit in the rear. Evviva l'Italia!'"

"A Piedmontese colonel, you fool! he would have shouted 'Viva Carlo Alberto!'" said Merthyr, now critically disgusted with the tale, and refusing to hear more. Two hours later, he despatched Beppo to Carlo in Brescia, warning him that for some insane purpose these two proclamations had been printed by Barto Rizzo, and that they were false.

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It was early on the morning of a second day, before sunrise, when Vittoria sent for Merthyr to conduct her to the cathedral. “There has been a battle,” she said. Her lips hardly joined to frame the syllables in speech. Merthyr refrained from asking where she had heard of the battle. As soon as the Duomo doors were open, he led her in and left her standing shrinking under the great vault with her neck fearfully drawn on her shoulders, as one sees birds under thunder. He thought that she was losing courage. Choosing to go out on the steps rather than look on her, he was struck by the sight of two horsemen, who proved to be Austrian officers, rattling at racing speed past the Duomo up the Corso. The sight of them made it seem possible that a battle had been fought. As soon as he was free, Merthyr went to the Duchess of Graatli, from whom he had the news of Novara. The officers he had seen were Prince Radocky and Lieutenant Wilfrid Pierson, the old Marshal’s emissaries of victory. They had made a bet on the bloody field about reaching Milan first, and the duchess affected to be full of the humour of this bet in order to conceal her exultation. The Lenkensteins called on her; the Countess of Lenkenstein, Anna, and Lena; and they were less considerate, and drew their joy openly from the source of his misery—a dreadful house for Merthyr to remain in; but he hoped to see Wilfrid, having heard the duchess rally Lena concerning the deeds of the white umbrella, which, Lena said, was pierced with balls, and had been preserved for her. “The dear foolish fellow insisted on marching right into the midst of the enemy with his absurd white umbrella; and wherever there was danger the men were seen following it. Prince Radocky told me the whole army was laughing. How he escaped death was a miracle!” She spoke unaffectedly of her admiration for the owner, and as Wilfrid came in she gave him brilliant eyes. He shook Merthyr’s hand without looking at him. The ladies would talk of nothing but the battle, so he went up to Merthyr, and under pretext of an eager desire for English news, drew him away.

“Her husband was not there? not at Novara, I mean?” he said.

“He’s at Brescia,” said Merthyr.

“Well, thank goodness he didn’t stand in those ranks!”

Wilfrid murmured, puffing thoughtfully over the picture they presented to his memory.

Merthyr then tried to hint to him that he had a sort of dull suspicion of Carlo’s being in personal danger, but of what kind he could not say. He mentioned Weisspriess by name; and Nagen; and Countess Anna. Wilfrid said, “I’ll find out if there’s anything, only don’t be fancying it. The man’s in a bad hole at Brescia. Weisspriess, I believe, is at Verona. He’s an honourable fellow. The utmost he would do would be to demand a duel; and I’m sure he’s heartily sick of that work. Besides, he and Countess Anna have quarrelled. Meet me;—by

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the way, you and I mustn't be seen meeting, I suppose. The duchess is neutral ground. Come here to-night. And don't talk of me, but say that a friend asks how she is, and hopes—the best things you can say for me. I must go up to their confounded chatter again. Tell her there's no fear, none whatever. You all hate us, naturally; but you know that Austrian officers are gentlemen. Don't speak my name to her just yet. Unless, of course, she should happen to allude to me, which is unlikely. I had a dismal idea that her husband was at Novara."

The tender-hearted duchess sent a message to Vittoria, bidding her not to forget that she had promised her at Meran to 'love her always.'

"And tell her," she said to Merthyr, "that I do not think I shall have my rooms open for the concert to-morrow night. I prefer to let Antonio-Pericles go mad. She will not surely consider that she is bound by her promise to him? He drags poor Irma from place to place to make sure the miserable child is not plotting to destroy his concert, as that man Sarpo did. Irma is half dead, and hasn't the courage to offend him. She declares she depends upon him for her English reputation. She has already caught a violent cold, and her sneezing is frightful. I have never seen so abject a creature. I have no compassion at the sight of her."

That night Merthyr heard from Wilfrid that a plot against Carlo Ammiani did exist. He repeated things he had heard pass between Countess d'Isorella and Irma in the chamber of Pericles before the late battle. Modestly confessing that he was 'for some reasons' in high favour with Countess Lena, he added that after a long struggle he had brought her to confess that her sister had sworn to have Countess Alessandra Ammiani begging at her feet.

By mutual consent they went to consult the duchess. She repelled the notion of Austrian women conspiring. "An Austrian noble lady—do you think it possible that she would act secretly to serve a private hatred? Surely I may ask you, for my sake, to think better of us?"

Merthyr showed her an opening to his ground by suggesting that Anna's antipathy to Victoria might spring more from a patriotic than a private source.

"Oh! I will certainly make inquiries, if only to save Anna's reputation with her enemies," the duchess answered rather proudly.

It would have been a Novara to Pericles if Vittoria had refused to sing. He held the pecuniarily-embarrassed duchess sufficiently in his power to command a concert at her house; his argument to those who pressed him to spare Vittoria in a season of grief running seriously, with visible contempt of their intellects, thus: "A great voice is an

ocean. You cannot drain it with forty dozen opera-hats. It is something found—an addition to the wealth of this life. Shall we not enjoy what we find? You do not wear out a picture by looking at it; likewise you do not wear out a voice by listening to it.

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A bird has wings;—here is a voice. Why were they given? I should say, to go into the air. Ah; but not if grandmother is ill. What is a grandmother to the wings and the voice? If to sing would kill,—yes, then let the puny thing be silent! But Sandra Belloni has a soul that has not a husband—except her Art. Her body is husbanded; but her soul is above her body. You would treat it as below. Art is her soul's husband! Besides, I have her promise. She is a girl who will go up to a loaded gun's muzzle if she gives her word. And besides, her husband may be shot to-morrow. So, all she sings now is clear gain."

Vittoria sent word to him that she would sing.

In the meantime a change had come upon Countess Anna. Weisspriess, her hero, appeared at her brother's house, fresh from the field of Novara, whither he had hurried from Verona on a bare pretext, that was a breach of military discipline requiring friendly interposition in high quarters. Unable to obtain an audience with Count Lenkenstein, he remained in the hall, hoping for things which he affected to care nothing for; and so it chanced that he saw Lena, who was mindful that her sister had suffered much from passive jealousy when Wilfrid returned from the glorious field, and led him to Anna, that she also might rejoice in a hero. Weisspriess did not refrain from declaring on the way that he would rather charge against a battery. Some time after, Anna lay in Lena's arms, sobbing out one of the wildest confessions ever made by woman:—she adored Weisspriess; she hated Nagen; but was miserably bound to the man she hated. "Oh! now I know what love is." She repeated this with transparent enjoyment of the opposing sensations by whose shock the knowledge was revealed to her.

"How can you be bound to Major Nagan?" asked Lena.

"Oh! why? except that I have been possessed by devils."

Anna moaned. "Living among these Italians has distempered my blood." She exclaimed that she was lost.

"In what way can you be lost?" said Lena.

"I have squandered more than half that I possess. I am almost a beggar. I am no longer the wealthy Countess Anna. I am much poorer than anyone of us."

"But Major Weisspriess is a man of honour, and if he loves you—"

"Yes; he loves me! he loves me! or would he come to me after I have sent him against a dozen swords? But he is poor; he must, must marry a wealthy woman. I used to hate him because I thought he had his eye on money. I love him for it now. He deserves wealth; he is a matchless hero. He is more than the first swordsman of our army; he is

a knightly man. Oh my soul Johann!" She very soon fell to raving. Lena was implored by her to give her hand to Weisspriess in reward for his heroism—"For you are rich," Anna said; "you will not have to go to him feeling that you have made him face death a dozen times for your sake, and that you thank

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him and reward him by being a whimpering beggar in his arms. Do, dearest! Will you? Will you, to please me, marry Johann? He is not unworthy of you." And more of this hysterical hypocrisy, which brought on fits of weeping. "I have lived among these savages till I have ceased to be human—forgotten everything but my religion," she said. "I wanted Weisspriess to show them that they dared not stand up against a man of us, and to tame the snarling curs. He did. He is brave. He did as much as a man could do, but I was unappeasable. They seem to have bitten me till I had a devouring hunger to humiliate them. Lena, will you believe that I have no hate for Carlo Ammiani or the woman he has married? None! and yet, what have I done!" Anna smote her forehead. "They are nothing but little dots on a field for me. I don't care whether they live or die. It's like a thing done in sleep."

"I want to know what you have done," said Lena caressingly.

"You at least will try to reward our truest hero, and make up to him for your sister's unkindness, will you not?" Anna replied with a cajolery wonderfully like a sincere expression of her wishes. "He will be a good husband.. He has proved it by having been so faithful a—a lover. So you may be sure of him. And when he is yours, do not let him fight again, Lena, for I have a sickening presentiment that his next duel is his last."

"Tell me," Lena entreated her, "pray tell me what horrible thing you have done to prevent your marrying him."

"With their pride and their laughter," Anna made answer; "the fools! were they to sting us perpetually and not suffer for it? That woman, the Countess Alessandra, as she's now called—have you forgotten that she helped our Paul's assassin to escape? was she not eternally plotting against Austria? And I say that I love Austria. I love my country; I plot for my country. She and her husband plot, and I plot to thwart them. I have ruined myself in doing it. Oh, my heart! why has it commenced beating again? Why did Weisspriess come here? He offended me. He refused to do my orders, and left me empty-handed, and if he suffers. too," Anna relieved a hard look with a smile of melancholy, "I hope he will not; I cannot say more."

"And I'm to console him if he does?" said Lena.

"At least, I shall be out of the way," said Anna. "I have still money enough to make me welcome in a convent."

"I am to marry him?" Lena persisted, and half induced Anna to act a feeble part, composed of sobs and kisses and full confession of her plight. Anna broke from her in time to leave what she had stated of herself vague and self-justificatory, so that she kept

her pride, and could forgive, as she was ready to do even so far as to ask forgiveness in turn, when with her awakened enamoured heart she heard Vittoria sing at the concert of Pericles. Countess Alessandra's divine gift, which she

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would not withhold, though in a misery of apprehension; her grave eyes, which none could accuse of coldness, though they showed no emotion; her simple noble manner that seemed to lift her up among the forces threatening her; these expressions of a superior soul moved Anna under the influence of the incomparable voice to pass over envious contrasts, and feel the voice and the nature were one in that bosom. Could it be the same as the accursed woman who had stood before her at Meran? She could hardly frame the question, but she had the thought sufficiently firmly to save her dignity; she was affected by very strong emotion when Vittoria's singing ended, and nothing but the revival of the recollection of her old contempt preserved her from an impetuous desire to take the singer by the hand and have all clear between them; for they were now of equal rank to tolerating eyes. "But she has no religious warmth!" Anna reflected with a glow of satisfaction. The concert was broken up by Laura Piaveni. She said out loud that the presence of Major Weisspriess was intolerable to the Countess Alessandra. It happened that Weisspriess entered the room while Laura sat studying the effect produced by her countrywoman's voice on the thick eyelids of Austrian Anna; and Laura, seeing their enemy ready to weep in acknowledgment of their power, scorned the power which could never win freedom, and broke up the sitting, citing the offence of the presence of Weisspriess for a pretext. The incident threw Anna back upon her old vindictiveness. It caused an unpleasant commotion in the duchess's saloon. Count Serabiglione was present, and ran round to Weisspriess, apologizing for his daughter's behaviour. "Do you think I can't deal with your women as well as your men, you ass?" said Weisspriess, enraged by the scandal of the scene. He was overheard by Count Karl Lenkenstein, who took him to task sharply for his rough speech; but Anna supported her lover, and they joined hands publicly. Anna went home prostrated with despair. "What conscience is in me that I should wish one of my Kaiser's officers killed?" she cried enigmatically to Lena. "But I must have freedom. Oh! to be free. I am chained to my enemy, and God blesses that woman. He makes her weep, but he blesses her, for her body is free, and mine,—the thought of mine sets flames creeping up my limbs as if I were tied to the stake. Losing a husband you love —what is that to taking a husband you hate?" Still Lena could get no plain confession from her, for Anna clung to self-justification, and felt it abandoning her, and her soul fluttering in a black gulf when she opened her month to disburden herself.

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There came tidings of the bombardment of Brescia one of the historic deeds of infamy. Many officers of the Imperial army perceived the shame which it cast upon their colours, even in those intemperate hours, and Karl Lenkenstein assumed the liberty of private friendship to go complaining to the old Marshal, who was too true a soldier to condemn a soldier in action, however strong his disapproval of proceedings. The liberty assumed by Karl was excessive; he spoke out in the midst of General officers as if his views were shared by them and the Marshal; and his error was soon corrected; one after another reproached him, until the Marshal, pitying his condition, sent him into his writing-closet, where he lectured the youth on military discipline. It chanced that there followed between them a question upon what the General in command at Brescia would do with his prisoners; and hearing that they were subject to the rigours of a court-martial, and if adjudged guilty, would forthwith summarily be shot, Karl ventured to ask grace for Vittoria's husband. He succeeded finally in obtaining his kind old Chief's promise that Count Ammiani should be tried in Milan, and as the bearer of a paper to that effect, be called on his sisters to get them or Wilfrid to convey word to Vittoria of her husband's probable safety. He found Anna in a swoon, and Lena and the duchess bending over her. The duchess's chasseur Jacob Baumwalder Feckelwitz had been returning from Moran, when on the Brescian high-road he met the spy Luigi, and acting promptly under the idea that Luigi was always a pestilential conductor of detestable correspondence, he attacked him, overthrew him, and ransacked him, and bore the fruit of his sagacious exertions to his mistress in Milan; it was Violetta d'Isorella's letter to Carlo Ammiani. "I have read it," the duchess said; "contrary to any habits when letters are not addressed to me. I bring it open to your sister Anna. She catches sight of one or two names and falls down in the state in which you see her."

"Leave her to me," said Karl.

He succeeded in extracting from Anna hints of the fact that she had paid a large sum of her own money to Countess d'Isorella for secrets connected with the Bergamasc and Brescian rising. "We were under a mutual oath to be silent, but if one has broken it the other cannot; so I confess it to you, dearest good brother. I did this for my country at my personal sacrifice."

Karl believed that he had a sister magnificent in soul. She was glad to have deluded him, but she could not endure his praises, which painted to her imagination all that she might have been if she had not dashed her patriotism with the low cravings of vengeance, making herself like some abhorrent mediaeval grotesque, composed of eagle and reptile. She was most eager in entreating him to save Count Ammiani's life. Carlo, she said, was their enemy, but he had been their friend, and she declared with singular earnestness that she should never again sleep or hold up her head, if he were slain or captured.

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“My Anna is justified by me in everything she has done,” Karl said to the duchess.

“In that case,” the duchess replied, “I have only to differ with her to feel your sword’s point at my breast.”

“I should certainly challenge the man who doubted her,” said Karl.

The duchess laughed with a scornful melancholy.

On the steps of the door where his horse stood saddled, he met Wilfrid, and from this promised brother-in-law received matter for the challenge. Wilfrid excitedly accused Anna of the guilt of a conspiracy to cause the destruction of Count Ammiani. In the heat of his admiration for his sister, Karl struck him on the cheek with his glove, and called him a name by which he had passed during the days of his disgrace, signifying one who plays with two parties. Lena’s maid heard them arrange to meet within an hour, and she having been a witness of the altercation, ran to her mistress in advance of Wilfrid, and so worked on Lena’s terrors on behalf of her betrothed and her brother, that Lena, dropped at Anna’s feet telling her all that she had gathered and guessed in verification of Wilfrid’s charge, and imploring her to confess the truth. Anna, though she saw her concealment pierced, could not voluntarily forego her brother’s expressed admiration of her, and clung to the tatters of secresy. After a brief horrid hesitation, she chose to face Wilfrid. This interview began with lively recriminations, and was resulting in nothing—for Anna refused to be shaken by his statement that the Countess d’Isorella had betrayed her, and perceived that she was listening to suspicions only—when, to give his accusation force, Wilfrid said that Brescia had surrendered and that Count Ammiani had escaped.

“And I thank God for it!” Anna exclaimed, and with straight frowning eyes demanded the refutation of her sincerity.

“Count Ammiani and his men have five hours’ grace ahead of Major Nagen and half a regiment,” said Wilfrid.

At this she gasped; she had risen her breath to deny or defy, and hung on the top of it without a voice.

“Tell us—say, but do say—confess that you know Nagen to be a name of mischief,” Lena prayed her.

I will say anything to prevent my brother from running into danger,” Anna rejoined.

“She is most foully accused by one whom we permitted to aspire to be of our own family,” said Karl.

“Yet you, Karl, have always been the first to declare her revengeful,” Lena turned to him.

“Help, Karl, help me,” said Anna.

“Yes!” cried her sister; “there you stand, and ask for help, meanest of women! Do you think these men are not in earnest? Karl is to help you, and you will not speak a word to save him from a grave before night, or me from a lover all of blood.”

“Am I to be the sacrifice?” said Anna.

“Whatever you call it, Wilfrid has spoken truth of you, and to none but members of our family; and he had a right to say it, and you are bound now to acknowledge it.”

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“I acknowledge that I love and serve my country, Lena.”

“Not with a pure heart: you can’t forgive. Insult or a wrong makes a madwoman of you. Confess, Anna! You know well that you can’t kneel to a priest’s ear, for you’ve stopped your conscience. You have pledged yourself to misery to satisfy a spite, and you have not the courage to ask for—” Lena broke her speech like one whose wits have been kindled. “Yes, Karl,” she resumed; “Anna begged you to help her. You will. Take her aside and save her from being miserable forever. You do mean to fight my Wilfrid?”

“I am certainly determined to bring him to repentance leaving him the option of the way,” said Karl.

Lena took her sullen sister by the arm.

“Anna, will you let these two men go—to slaughter? Look at them; they are both our brothers. One is dearer than a brother to me, and, oh God! I have known what it is to half-lose him. You to lose a lover and have to go bound by a wretched oath to be the wife of a detestable short-sighted husband! Oh, what an abominable folly!”

This epithet, ‘short-sighted,’ curiously forced in by Lena, was like a shock of the very image of Nagen’s needle features thrust against Anna’s eyes; the spasm of revulsion in her frame was too quick for her habitual self-control.

At that juncture Weisspriess opened the door, and Anna’s eyes met his.

“You don’t spare me,” she murmured to Lena.

Her voice trembled, and Wilfrid bent his head near her, pressing her hand, and said, “Not only I, but Countess Alessandra Ammiani exonerates you from blame. As she loves her country, you love yours. My words to Karl were an exaggeration of what I know and think. Only tell me this; —if Nagen captures Count Ammiani, how is he likely to deal with him?”

“How can I inform you?” Anna replied coldly; but she reflected in a fire of terror. She had given Nagen the prompting of a hundred angry exclamations in the days of her fever of hatred; she had nevertheless forgotten their parting words; that is, she had forgotten her mood when he started for Brescia, and the nature of the last instructions she had given him. Revolting from the thought of execution being done upon Count Ammiani, as one quickly springing out of fever dreams, all her white face went into hard little lines, like the withered snow which wears away in frost. “Yes,” she said; and again, “Yes,” to something Weisspriess whispered in her ear, she knew not clearly what. Weisspriess told Wilfrid that he would wait below. As he quitted the room, the duchess entered, and went up to Anna. “My good soul,” she said, “you have, I trust, listened to Major Weisspriess. Oh, Anna! you wanted revenge. Now take it, as becomes a high-

born woman; and let your enemy come to your feet, and don't spurn her when she is there. Must I inform you that I have been to Countess d'Isorella myself with a man who can compel her to speak? But Anna

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von Lenkenstein is not base like that Italian. Let them think of you as they will, I believe you to have a great heart. I am sure you will not allow personal sentiment to sully your devotion to our country. Show them that our Austrian faces can be bright; and meet her whom you call your enemy; you cannot fly. You must see her, or you betray yourself. The poor creature's husband is in danger of capture or death."

While the duchess's stern under-breath ran on hurriedly, convincing Anna that she had, with no further warning, to fall back upon her uttermost strength—the name of Countess Alessandra Ammiani was called at the door. Instinctively the others left a path between Vittoria and Anna. It was one of the moments when the adoption of a decisive course says more in vindication of conduct than long speeches. Anna felt that she was on her trial. For the first time since she had looked on this woman she noticed the soft splendour of Vittoria's eyes, and the harmony of her whole figure; nor was the black dress of protesting Italian mourning any longer offensive in her sight, but on a sudden pitiful, for Anna thought: "It may at this very hour be for her husband, and she not knowing it." And with that she had a vision under her eyelids of Nagen like a shadowy devil in pursuit of men flying, and striking herself and Vittoria worse than dead in one blow levelled at Carlo Ammiani. A sense of supernatural horror chilled her blood when she considered again, facing her enemy, that their mutual happiness was by her own act involved in the fate of one life. She stepped farther than the half-way to greet her visitor, whose hands she took. Before a word was uttered between them, she turned to her brother, and with a clear voice said:

"Karl, the Countess Alessandra's husband, our old, friend Carlo Ammiani, may need succour in his flight. Try to cross it; or better, get among those who are pursuing him; and don't delay one minute. You understand me."

Count Karl bowed his head, bitterly humbled.

Anna's eyes seemed to interrogate Vittoria, "Can I do, more?" but her own heart answered her.

Inveterate when following up her passion for vengeance, she was fanatical in responding to the suggestions of remorse.

"Stay; I will despatch Major Weisspriess in my own name," she said. "He is a trusty messenger, and he knows those mountains. Whoever is the officer broken for aiding Count Ammiani's escape, he shall be rewarded by me to the best of my ability. Countess Alessandra, I have anticipated your petition; I hope you may not have to reproach me. Remember that my country was in pieces when you and I declared war. You will not suffer without my suffering tenfold. Perhaps some day you will do me the

favour to sing to me, when there is no chance of interruption. At present it is cruel to detain you."

Vittoria said simply: "I thank you, Countess Anna."

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She was led out by Count Karl to where Merthyr awaited her. All wondered at the briefness of a scene that had unexpectedly brought the crisis to many emotions and passions, as the broken waters of the sea beat together and make here or there the wave which is topmost. Anna's grand initiative hung in their memories like the throbbing of a pulse, so hotly their sensations swarmed about it, and so intensely it embraced and led what all were desiring. The duchess kissed Anna, saying:

"That is a noble heart to which you have become reconciled. Though you should never be friends, as I am with one of them, you will esteem her. Do not suppose her to be cold. She is the mother of an unborn little one, and for that little one's sake she follows out every duty; she checks every passion in her bosom. She will spare no sacrifice to save her husband, but she has brought her mind to look at the worst, for fear that a shock should destroy her motherly guard."

"Really, duchess," Anna replied, "these are things for married women to hear;" and she provoked some contempt of her conventional delicacy, at the same time that in her imagination the image of Vittoria struggling to preserve this burden of motherhood against a tragic mischance, completely humiliated and overwhelmed her, as if nature had also come to add to her mortifications.

"I am ready to confess everything I have done, and to be known for what I am," she said.

"Confess no more than is necessary, but do everything you can; that's wisest," returned the duchess.

"Ah; you mean that you have nothing to learn." Anna shuddered.

"I mean that you are likely to run into the other extreme of disfavouring yourself just now, my child. And," continued the duchess, "you have behaved so splendidly that I won't think ill of you."

Before the day darkened, Wilfrid obtained, through Prince Radocky's influence, an order addressed to Major Nagen for the surrender of prisoners into his hands. He and Count Karl started for the Val Camonica on the chance of intercepting the pursuit. These were not much wiser than their guesses and their apprehensions made them; but Weisspriess started on the like errand after an interview with Anna, and he had drawn sufficient intelligence out of sobs, and broken sentences, and torture of her spirit, to understand that if Count Ammiani fell alive or dead into Nagen's hands, Nagen by Anna's scrupulous oath, had a claim on her person and her fortune: and he knew Nagen to be a gambler. As he was now by promotion of service Nagen's superior officer, and a near relative of the Brescian commandant, who would be induced to justify his steps, his object was to reach and arbitrarily place himself over Nagen, as if upon a special mission, and to get the lead of the expedition. For that purpose he struck

somewhat higher above the Swiss borders than Karl and Wilfrid, and gained a district in the mountains above

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the vale, perfectly familiar to him. Obeying directions forwarded to her by Wilfrid, Vittoria left Milan for the Val Camonica no later than the evening; Laura was with her in the carriage; Merthyr took horse after them as soon as he had succeeded in persuading Countess Ammiani to pardon her daughter's last act of wilfulness, and believe that, during the agitation of unnumbered doubts, she ran less peril in the wilds where her husband fled, than in her home.

"I will trust to her idolatrously, as you do," Countess Ammiani said; "and perhaps she has already proved to me that I may."

Merthyr saw Agostino while riding out of Milan, and was seen by him; but the old man walked onward, looking moodily on the stones, and merely waved his hand behind.

CHAPTER XLVI

THE LAST

There is hard winter overhead in the mountains when Italian Spring walks the mountain-sides with flowers, and hangs deep valley-walls with flowers half fruit; the sources of the rivers above are set about with fangs of ice, while the full flat stream runs to a rose of sunlight. High among the mists and snows were the fugitives of Brescia, and those who for love or pity struggled to save them wandered through the blooming vales, sometimes hearing that they had crossed the frontier into freedom, and as often that they were scattered low in death and captivity. Austria here, Switzerland yonder, and but one depth between to bound across and win calm breathing. But mountain might call to mountain, peak shine to peak; a girdle of steel drove the hunted men back to frosty heights and clouds, the shifting bosom of snows and lightnings. They saw nothing of hands stretched out to succour. They saw a sun that did not warm them, a home of exile inaccessible, crags like an earth gone to skeleton in hungry air; and below, the land of their birth, beautiful, and sown everywhere for them with torture and captivity, or death, the sweetest. Fifteen men numbered the escape from Brescia. They fought their way twice through passes of the mountains, and might easily, in their first dash Northward from the South-facing hills, have crossed to the Valtelline and Engadine, but that in their insanity of anguish they meditated another blow, and were readier to march into the plains with the tricolour than to follow any course of flight. When the sun was no longer in their blood they thought of reason and of rest; they voted the expedition to Switzerland, that so they should get round to Rome, and descended from the crags of the Tonale, under which they were drawn to an ambush, suffering three of their party killed, and each man bloody with wounds. The mountain befriended them, and gave them safety, as truth is given by a bitter friend. Among icy

crags and mists, where the touch of life grows dull as the nail of a fore-finger, the features of the mountain were stamped on them, and with hunger

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they lost pride, and with solitude laughter; with endless fleeing they lost the aim of flight; some became desperate, a few craven. Companionship was broken before they parted in three bodies, commanded severally by Colonel Corte, Carlo Ammiani, and Barto Rizzo. Corte reached the plains, masked by the devotion of Carlo's band, who lured the soldiery to a point and drew a chase, while Corte passed the line and pushed on for Switzerland. Carlo told off his cousin Angelo Guidascarpi in the list of those following Corte; but when he fled up to the snows again, he beheld Angelo spectral as the vapour on a jut of rock awaiting him. Barto Rizzo had chosen his own way, none knew whither. Carlo, Angelo, Marco Sana, and a sharply-wounded Brescian lad, conceived the scheme of traversing the South Tyrol mountain-range toward Friuli, whence Venice, the still-breathing republic, might possibly be gained. They carried the boy in turn till his arms drooped long down, and when they knew the soul was out of him they buried him in snow, and thought him happy. It was then that Marco Sana took his death for an omen, and decided them to turn their heads once more for Switzerland; telling them that the boy, whom he last had carried, uttered "Rome" with the flying breath. Angelo said that Sana would get to Rome; and Carlo, smiling on Angelo, said they were to die twins though they had been born only cousins. The language they had fallen upon was mystical, scarce intelligible to other than themselves. On a clear morning, with the Swiss peaks in sight, they were condemned by want of food to quit their fastness for the valley.

Vittoria read the faces of the mornings as human creatures base tried to gather the sum of their destinies off changing surfaces, fair not meaning fair, nor black black, but either the mask upon the secret of God's terrible will; and to learn it and submit, was the spiritual burden of her motherhood, that the child leaping with her heart might live. Not to hope blindly, in the exceeding anxiousness of her passionate love, nor blindly to fear; not to bet her soul fly out among the twisting chances; not to sap her great maternal duty by affecting false stoical serenity:— to nurse her soul's strength, and suckle her womanly weakness with the tsars which are poison—when repressed; to be at peace with a disastrous world for the sake of the dependent life unborn; lay such pure efforts she clung to God. Soft dreams of sacred nuptial tenderness, tragic images, wild pity, were like phantoms encircling her, plucking at her as she went, lest they were beneath her feet, and she kept them from lodging between her breasts. The thought that her husband, though he should have perished, was not a life lost if their child lived, sustained her powerfully. It seemed to whisper at times almost as it were Carlo's ghost breathing in her ears: "On thee!" On her the further duty devolved; and she trod down hope, lest it should build her up and bring a shock to surprise her fortitude; she put back alarm.

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The mountains and the valleys scarce had names for her understanding; they were but a scene where the will of her Maker was at work. Rarely has a soul been so subjected to its own force. She certainly had the image of God in her mind.

Yet when her ayes lingered on any mountain gorge, the fate of her husband sang within it a strange chant, ending in a key that rang sounding through all her being, and seemed to question heaven. This music framed itself; it was still when she looked at the shrouded mountain-tops. A shadow meting sunlight on the long green slopes aroused it, and it hummed above the tumbling hasty foam, and penetrated hanging depths of foliage, sad-hued rock-clefts, dark green ravines; it became convulsed where the mountain threw forward in a rushing upward line against the sky, there to be severed at the head by cloud. It was silent among the vines.

Most painfully did human voices affect her when she had this music; speech was a scourge to her sense of hearing, and touch distressed her: an edge of purple flame would then unfold the vision of things to her eyes. She had lost memory; and if by hazard unawares one idea was projected by some sudden tumult of her enslaved emotions beyond known and visible circumstances, her intelligence darkened with am oppressive dread like that of zealots of the guilt of impiety.

Thus destitute, her eye took innumerable pictures sharp as on a brass-plate: torrents, goat-tracks winding up red earth, rocks veiled with water, cottage and children, strings of villagers mounting to the church, one woman kneeling before a wayside cross, her basket at her back, and her child gazing idly by; perched hamlets, rolling pasture-fields, the vast mountain lines. She asked all that she saw, “Does he live?” but the life was out of everything, and these shows told of no life, neither of joy nor of grief. She could only distantly connect the appearance of the white-coated soldiery with the source of her trouble. They were no more than figures on a screen that hid the flashing of the sword which renders dumb. She had charity for one who was footsore and sat cherishing his ankle by a village spring, and she fed him, and not until he was far behind, thought that he might have seen the white face of her husband.

Accurate tidings could not be obtained, though the whole course of the vale was full of stories of escapes, conflicts, and captures. Merthyr learnt positively that some fugitives had passed the cordon. He came across Wilfrid and Count Karl, who both verified it in the most sanguine manner. They knew, however, that Major Nagen continued in the mountains. Riding by a bend of the road, Merthyr beheld a man playing among children, with one hand and his head down apparently for concealment at his approach. It proved to be Beppo. The man believed that Count Ammiani had fled to Switzerland. Barto Rizzo, he said, was in the mountains still, and Beppo

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invoked damnation on him, as the author of those lying proclamations which had ruined Brescia. He had got out of the city later than the others and was seeking to evade the outposts, that he might join his master—"that is, my captain, for I have only one master;" he corrected the slip of his tongue appealingly to Merthyr. His left hand was being continually plucked at by the children while he talked, and after Merthyr had dispersed them with a shower of small coin, he showed the hand, saying, glad of eye, that it had taken a sword-cut intended for Count Ammiani. Merthyr sent him back to mount the carriage, enjoining him severely not to speak.

When Carlo and his companions descended from the mountains, they entered a village where there was an inn recognized by Angelo as the abode of Jacopo Cruchi. He there revived Carlo's animosity toward Weisspriess by telling the tale of the passage to Meran, and his good reasons for determining to keep guard over the Countess Alessandra all the way. Subsequently Angelo went to Jacopo for food. This he procured, but he was compelled to leave the man behind, and unpaid. It was dark when he left the inn; he had some difficulty in evading a flock of whitecoats, and his retreat from the village was still on the Austrian side. Somewhat about midnight Merthyr reached the inn, heralding the carriage. As Jacopo caught sight of Vittoria's face, he fell with his shoulders straightened against the wall, and cried out loudly that he had betrayed no one, and mentioned Major Weisspriess by name as having held the point of his sword at him and extracted nothing better than a nave of the hand and a lie; in other words, that the fugitives had retired to the Tyrolese mountains, and that he had shammed ignorance of who they were. Merthyr read at a glance that Jacopo had the large swallow and calm digestion for bribes, and getting the fellow alone he laid money in view, out of which, by doubling the sum to make Jacopo correct his first statement, and then by threatening to withdraw it altogether, he gained knowledge of the fact that Angelo Guidascarpi had recently visited the inn, and had started from it South-eastward, and that Major Weisspriess was following on his track. He wrote a line of strong entreaty to Weisspriess, lest that officer should perchance relapse into anger at the taunts of prisoners abhorring him with the hatred of Carlo and Angelo. At the same time he gave Beppo a considerable supply of money, and then sent him off, armed as far as possible to speed Count Ammiani safe across the borders, if a fugitive; or if a prisoner, to ensure the best which could be hoped for him from an adversary become generous. That evening Vittoria lay with her head on Laura's lap, and the pearly little crescent of her ear in moonlight by the window. So fair and young and still she looked that Merthyr feared for her, and thought of sending her back to Countess Ammiani.

Her first question with the lifting of her eyelids was if he had ceased to trust to her courage.

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“No,” said Merthyr; “there are bounds to human strength; that is all.”

She answered: “There would be to mine—if I had not more than human strength beside me. I bow my head, dearest; it is that. I feel that I cannot break down as long as I know what is passing. Does my husband live?”

“Yes, he lives,” said Merthyr; and she gave him her hand, and went to her bed.

He learnt from Laura that when Beppo mounted the carriage in silence, a fit of ungovernable wild trembling had come on her, broken at intervals by a cry that something was concealed. Laura could give no advice; she looked on Merthyr and Vittoria as two that had an incomprehensible knowledge of the power of one another’s natures, and the fiery creature remained passive in perplexity of minds as soft an attendant as a suffering woman could have:

Merthyr did not sleep, and in the morning Vittoria said to him, “You want to be active, my friend. Go, and we will wait for you here. I know that I am never deceived by you, and when I see you I know that the truth speaks and bids me be worthy of it Go up there,” she pointed with shut eyes at the mountains; “leave me to pray for greater strength. I am among Italians at this inn; and shall spend money here; the poor people love it.” She smiled a little, showing a glimpse of her old charitable humour.

Merthyr counselled Laura that in case of evil tidings during his absence she should reject her feminine ideas of expediency, and believe that she was speaking to a brave soul firmly rooted in the wisdom of heaven.

“Tell her?—she will die,” said Laura, shuddering.

“Get tears from her,” Merthyr rejoined; “but hide nothing from her for a single instant; keep her in daylight. For God’s sake, keep her in daylight.”

“It’s too sharp a task for me.” She repeated that she was incapable of it.

“Ah,” said he, “look at your Italy, how she weeps! and she has cause. She would die in her grief, if she had no faith for what is to come. I dare say it is not, save in the hearts of one or two, a conscious faith, but it’s real divine strength; and Alessandra Ammiani has it. Do as I bid you. I return in two days.”

Without understanding him, Laura promised that she would do her utmost to obey, and he left her muttering to herself as if she were schooling her lips to speak reluctant words. He started for the mountains with gladdened limbs, taking a guide, who gave his name as Lorenzo, and talked of having been ‘out’ in the previous year. “I am a patriot, signore! and not only in opposition to my beast of a wife, I assure you: a downright patriot, I mean.” Merthyr was tempted to discharge him at first, but controlled his English antipathy to babblers, and discovered him to be a serviceable fellow. Toward

nightfall they heard shots up a rock-strewn combe of the lower slopes; desultory shots indicating rifle-firing at long range.

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Darkness made them seek shelter in a pine-hut; starting from which at dawn, Lorenzo ran beating about like a dog over the place where the shots had sounded on the foregoing day; he found a stone spotted with blood. Not far from the stone lay a military glove that bore brown-crimson finger-ends. They were striking off to a dairy-but for fresh milk, when out of a crevice of rock overhung by shrubs a man's voice called, and Merthyr climbing up from perch to perch, saw Marco Sana lying at half length, shot through hand and leg. From him Merthyr learnt that Carlo and Angelo had fled higher up; yesterday they had been attacked by coming who tried to lure there to surrender by coming forward at the head of his men and offering safety, and "other gabble," said Marco. He offered a fair shot at his heart, too, while he stood below a rock that Marco pointed at gloomily as a hope gone for ever; but Carlo would not allow advantage to be taken of even the treacherous simulation of chivalry, and only permitted firing after he had returned to his men. "I was hit here and here," said Marco, touching his wounds, as men can hardly avoid doing when speaking of the fresh wound. Merthyr got him on his feet, put money in his pocket, and led him off the big stones painfully. "They give no quarter," Marco assured him, and reasoned that it must be so, for they had not taken him prisoner, though they saw him fall, and ran by or in view of him in pursuit of Carlo. By this Merthyr was convinced that Weisspriess meant well. He left his guide in charge of Marco to help him into the Engadine. Greatly to his astonishment, Lorenzo tossed the back of his hand at the offer of money. "There shall be this difference between me and my wife," he remarked; "and besides, gracious signore, serving my countrymen for nothing, that's for love, and the Tedeschi can't punish me for it, so it's one way of cheating them, the wolves! "Merthyr shook his hand and said, "Instead of my servant, be my friend;" and Lorenzo made no feeble mouth, but answered, "Signore, it is much to my honour," and so they went different ways.

Left to himself Merthyr set step vigorously upward. Information from herdsmen told him that he was an hour off the foot of one of the passes. He begged them to tell any hunted men who might come within hail that a friend ran seeking them. Farther up, while thinking of the fine nature of that Lorenzo, and the many men like him who could not by the very existence of nobility in their bosoms suffer their country to go through another generation of servitude, his heart bounded immensely, for he heard a shout and his name, and he beheld two figures on a rock near the gorge where the mountain opened to its heights. But they were not Carlo and Angelo. They were Wilfrid and Count Karl, the latter of whom had discerned him through a telescope. They had good news to revive him, however: good at least in the main. Nagen had captured Carlo and Angelo, they believed;

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but they had left Weisspriess near on Nagen's detachment, and they furnished sound military reasons to show why, if Weisspriess favoured the escape, they should not be present. They supposed that they were not half-a-mile from the scene in the pass where Nagen was being forcibly deposed from his authority: Merthyr borrowed Count Karl's glass, and went as they directed him round a bluff of the descending hills, that faced the vale, much like a blown and beaten sea-cliff. Wilfrid and Karl were so certain of Count Ammiani's safety, that their only thought was to get under good cover before nightfall, and haply into good quarters, where the three proper requirements of the soldier-meat, wine, and tobacco—might be furnished to them. After an imperative caution that they should not present themselves before the Countess Alessandra, Merthyr sped quickly over the broken ground. How gaily the two young men cheered to him as he hurried on! He met a sort of pedlar turning the bluntfaced mountain-spur, and this man said, "Yes, sure enough, prisoners had been taken," and he was not aware of harm having been done to them; he fancied there was a quarrel between two captains. His plan being always to avoid the military, he had slunk round and away from them as fast as might be. An Austrian common soldier, a good-humoured German, distressed by a fall that had hurt his knee-cap, sat within the gorge, which was very wide at the mouth. Merthyr questioned him, and he, while mending one of his gathered cigar-ends, pointed to a meadow near the beaten track, some distance up the rocks. Whitecoats stood thick on it. Merthyr lifted his telescope and perceived an eager air about the men, though they stood ranged in careless order. He began to mount forthwith, but amazed by a sudden ringing of shot, he stopped, asking himself in horror whether it could be an execution. The shots and the noise increased, until the confusion of a positive mellay reigned above. The fall of the meadow swept to a bold crag right over the pathway, and with a projection that seen sideways made a vulture's head and beak of it. There rolled a corpse down the precipitous wave of green grass on to the crag, where it lodged, face to the sky; sword dangled from swordknot at one wrist, heels and arms were in the air, and the body caught midway hung poised and motionless. The firing deadened. Then Merthyr drawing nearer beneath the crag, saw one who had life in him slipping down toward the body, and knew the man for Beppo. Beppo knocked his hands together and groaned miserably, but flung himself astride the beak of the crag, and took the body in his arms, sprang down with it, and lay stunned at Merthyr's feet. Merthyr looked on the face of Carlo Ammiani.

EPILOGUE

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No uncontested version of the tragedy of Count Ammiani's death passed current in Milan during many years. With time it became disconnected from passion, and took form in a plain narrative. He and Angelo were captured by Major Nagen, and were, as the soldiers of the force subsequently let it be known, roughly threatened with what he termed I 'Brescian short credit.' The appearance of Major Weisspriess and his claim to the command created a violent discussion between the two officers. For Nagen, by all military rules, could well contest it. But Weisspriess had any body of the men of the army under his charm, and seeing the ascendency he gained with them over an unpopular officer, he dared the stroke for the charitable object he had in view. Having established his command, in spite of Nagen's wrathful protests and menaces, he spoke to the prisoners, telling Carlo that for his wife's sake he should be spared, and Angelo that he must expect the fate of a murderer. His address to them was deliberate, and quite courteous: he expressed himself sorry that a gallant gentleman like Angelo Guidascarpi should merit a bloody grave, but so it was. At the same time he entreated Count Ammiani to rely on his determination to save him. Major Nagen did not stand far removed from them. Carlo turned to him and repeated the words of Weisspriess; nor could Angelo restrain his cousin's vehement renunciation of hope and life in doing this. He accused Weisspriess of a long evasion of a brave man's obligation to repair an injury, charged him with cowardice, and requested Major Nagen, as a man of honour, to drag his brother officer to the duel. Nagen then said that Major Weisspriess was his superior, adding that his gallant brother officer had only of late objected to vindicate his reputation with his sword. Stung finally beyond the control of an irritable temper, Weisspriess walked out of sight of the soldiery with Carlo, to whom, at a special formal request from Weisspriess, Nagen handed his sword. Again he begged Count Ammiani to abstain from fighting; yea, to strike him and disable him, and fly, rather—than provoke the skill of his right hand. Carlo demanded his cousin's freedom. It was denied to him, and Carlo claimed his privilege. The witnesses of the duel were Jenna and another young subaltern: both declared it fair according to the laws of honour, when their stupefaction on beholding the proud swordsman of the army stretched lifeless on the brown leaves of the past year left them with power to speak. Thus did Carlo slay his old enemy who would have served as his friend. A shout of rescue was heard before Carlo had yielded up his weapon. Four haggard and desperate men, headed by Barto Rizzo, burst from an ambush on the guard encircling Angelo. There, with one thought of saving his doomed cousin and comrade, Carlo rushed, and not one Italian survived the fight.

An unarmed spectator upon the meadow-borders, Beppo, had but obscure glimpses of scenes shifting like a sky in advance of hurricane winds.

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Merthyr delivered the burden of death to Vittoria. Her soul had crossed the darkness of the river of death in that quiet agony preceding the revelation of her Maker's will, and she drew her dead husband to her bosom and kissed him on the eyes and the forehead, not as one who had quite gone away from her, but as one who lay upon another shore whither she would come. The manful friend, ever by her side, saved her by his absolute trust in her fortitude to bear the burden of the great sorrow undeceived, and to walk with it to its last resting-place on earth unobstructed. Clear knowledge of her, the issue of reverent love, enabled him to read her unequalled strength of nature, and to rely on her fidelity to her highest mortal duty in a conflict with extreme despair. She lived through it as her Italy had lived through the hours which brought her face to face with her dearest in death; and she also on the day, ten years later, when an Emperor and a King stood beneath the vault of the grand Duomo, and the organ and a peal of voices rendered thanks to heaven for liberty, could show the fruit of her devotion in the dark-eyed boy, Carlo Merthyr Ammiani, standing between Merthyr and her, with old blind Agostino's hands upon his head. And then once more, and but for once, her voice was heard in Milan.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Confess no more than is necessary, but do everything you can
English antipathy to babblers
He is in the season of faults
Impossible for us women to comprehend love without folly in man
Never, never love a married woman
Speech was a scourge to her sense of hearing