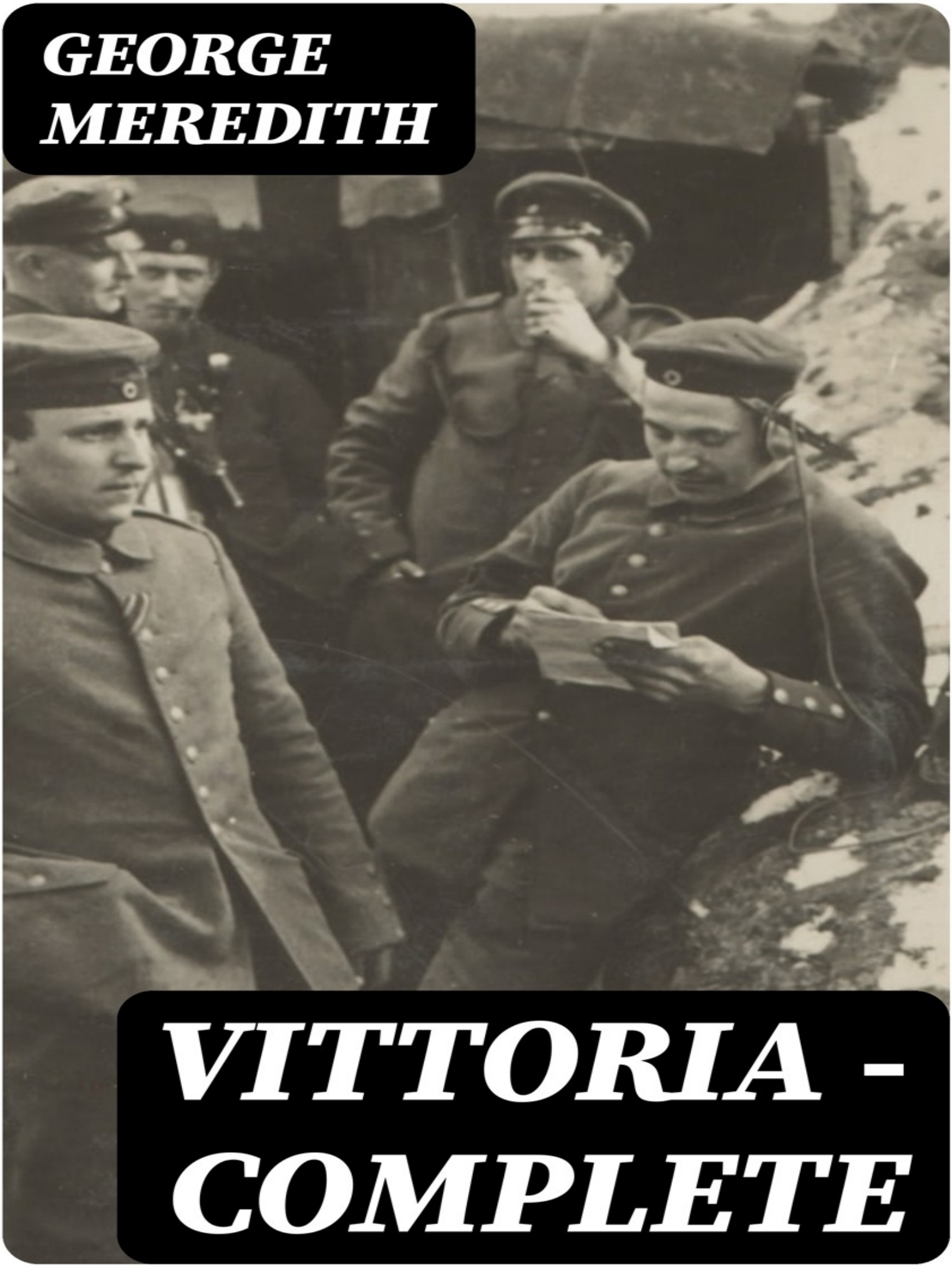
GEORGE MEREDITH



VITTORIA - COMPLETE

George Meredith

Vittoria — Complete

EAN 8596547224181

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

From Monte Motterone you survey the Lombard plain. It is a towering dome of green among a hundred pinnacles of grey and rust-red crags. At dawn the summit of the mountain has an eagle eye for the far Venetian boundary and the barrier of the Apennines; but with sunrise come the mists. The vast brown level is seen narrowing in; the Ticino and the Sesia waters, nearest, quiver on the air like sleepy lakes; the plain is engulphed up to the high ridges of the distant Southern mountain range, which lie stretched to a faint cloud-like line, in shape like a solitary monster of old seas crossing the Deluge. Long arms of vapour stretch across the urn-like valleys, and gradually thickening and swelling upward, enwrap the scored bodies of the ashen-faced peaks and the pastures of the green mountain, till the heights become islands over a forgotten earth. Bells of herds down the hidden run of the sweet grasses, and a continuous leaping of its rivulets, give the Motterone a voice of youth and homeliness amid that stern company of Titan-heads, for whom the hawk and the vulture cry. The storm has beaten at them until they have got the aspect of the storm. They take colour from sunlight, and are joyless in colour as in shade. When the lower world is under pushing steam, they wear the look of the revolted sons of Time, fast chained before scornful heaven in an iron peace. Day at last brings vigorous fire; arrows of light pierce the mist-wreaths, the dancing draperies, the floors of vapour; and the mountain of piled pasturages is seen with its foot on the

shore of Lago Maggiore. Down an extreme gulf the full sunlight, as if darting on a jewel in the deeps, seizes the blue-green lake with its isles. The villages along the darkly-wooded borders of the lake show white as clustered swans; here and there a tented boat is visible, shooting from terraces of vines, or hanging on its shadow. Monte Boscero is unveiled; the semicircle of the Piedmontese and the Swiss peaks, covering Lake Orta, behind, on along the Ticinese and the Grisons, leftward toward and beyond the Lugano hills, stand bare in black and grey and rust-red and purple. You behold a burnished realm of mountain and plain beneath the royal sun of Italy. In the foreground it shines hard as the lines of an irradiated Cellini shield. Farther away, over middle ranges that are soft and clear, it melts, confusing the waters with hot rays, and the forests with darkness, to where, wavering in and out of view like flying wings, and shadowed like wings of archangels with rose and with orange and with violet, silverwhite Alps are seen. You might take them for mystical streaming torches on the border-ground between vision and fancy. They lean as in a great flight forward upon Lombardy.

The curtain of an early autumnal morning was everywhere lifted around the Motterone, save for one milky strip of cloud that lay lizard-like across the throat of Monte Boscero facing it, when a party of five footfarers, who had met from different points of ascent some way below, and were climbing the mountain together, stood upon the cropped herbage of the second plateau, and stopped to eye the landscape; possibly also to get their breath. They were Italians. Two were fair-haired muscular men, bronzed by the

sun and roughly bearded, bearing the stamp of breed of one or other of the hill-cities under the Alps. A third looked a sturdy soldier, squareset and hard of feature, for whom beauties of scenery had few awakening charms. The remaining couple were an old man and a youth, upon whose shoulder the veteran leaned, and with a whimsical turn of head and eye, indicative of some playful cast of mind, poured out his remarks upon the objects in sight, and chuckled to himself, like one who has learnt the necessity to appreciate his own humour if he is disposed to indulge it. He was carelessly wrapped about in long loose woollen stuff, but the youth was dressed like a Milanese cavalier of the first quality, and was evidently one who would have been at home in the fashionable Corso. His face was of the sweetest virile Italian beauty. The head was long, like a hawk's, not too lean, and not sharply ridged from a rapacious beak, but enough to show characteristics of eagerness and promptitude. His eyes were darkest blue, the eyebrows and long disjoining eyelashes being very dark over them, which made their colour precious. The nose was straight and forward from the brows; a fluent black moustache ran with the curve of the upper lip, and lost its line upon a smooth olive cheek. The upper lip was firmly supported by the under, and the chin stood freely out from a fine neck and throat.

After a space an Austrian war-steamer was discerned puffing out of the harbour of Laveno.

“That will do,” said the old man. “Carlo, thou son of Paolo, we will stump upward once more. Tell me, hulloa, sir! are the best peaches doomed to entertain vile, domiciliary,

parasitical insects? I ask you, does nature exhibit motherly regard, or none, for the regions of the picturesque? None, I say. It is an arbitrary distinction of our day. To complain of the intrusion of that black-yellow flag and foul smoke-line on the lake underneath us is preposterous, since, as you behold, the heavens make no protestation. Let us up. There is comfort in exercise, even for an ancient creature such as I am. This mountain is my brother, and flatters me not—I am old."

"Take my arm, dear Agostino," said the youth.

"Never, my lad, until I need it. On, ahead of me, goat! chamois! and teach me how the thing used to be done in my time. Old legs must be the pupils of young ones mark that piece of humility, and listen with respectfulness to an old head by-and-by."

It was the autumn antecedent to that memorable Spring of the great Italian uprising, when, though for a tragic issue, the people of Italy first felt and acted as a nation, and Charles Albert, called the Sword of Italy, aspired, without comprehension of the passion of patriotism by which it was animated, to lead it quietly into the fold of his Piedmontese kingship.

There is not an easier or a pleasanter height to climb than the Motterone, if, in Italian heat, you can endure the disappointment of seeing the summit, as you ascend, constantly flit away to a farther station. It seems to throw its head back, like a laughing senior when children struggle up for kissings. The party of five had come through the vines from Stresa and from Baveno. The mountain was strange to them, and they had already reckoned twice on having the

topmost eminence in view, when reaching it they found themselves on a fresh plateau, traversed by wild water-courses, and browsed by Alpine herds; and again the green dome was distant. They came to the highest chalet, where a hearty wiry young fellow, busily employed in making cheese, invited them to the enjoyment of shade and fresh milk. “For the sake of these adolescents, who lose much and require much, let it be so,” said Agostino gravely, and not without some belief that he consented to rest on behalf of his companions. They allowed the young mountaineer to close the door, and sat about his fire like sagacious men. When cooled and refreshed, Agostino gave the signal for departure, and returned thanks for hospitality. Money was not offered and not expected. As they were going forth the mountaineer accompanied them to the step on the threshold, and with a mysterious eagerness in his eyes, addressed Agostino.

“Signore, is it true?—the king marches?”

“Who is the king, my friend?” returned Agostino. “If he marches out of his dominions, the king confers a blessing on his people perchance.”

“Our king, signore!” The mountaineer waved his finger as from Novara toward Milan.

Agostino seemed to awaken swiftly from his disguise of an absolute gravity. A red light stood in his eyeballs, as if upon a fiery answer. The intemperate fit subsided. Smoothing dawn his mottled grey beard with quieting hands, he took refuge in his habitual sententious irony.

“My friend, I am not a hare in front of the king, nor am I a ram in the rear of him: I fly him not, neither do I propel him.

So, therefore, I cannot predict the movements of the king. Will the wind blow from the north to-morrow, think you?”

The mountaineer sent a quick gaze up the air, as to descry signs.

“Who knows?” Agostino continued, though not playing into the smiles of his companions; “the wind will blow straight thither where there is a vacuum; and all that we can state of the king is, that there is a positive vacuum here. It would be difficult to predict the king's movements save by such weighty indications.”

He laid two fingers hard against the rib which shields the heart. It had become apparently necessary for the speaker to relieve a mind surcharged with bile at the mention of the king; for, having done, he rebuked with an amazed frown the indiscretion of Carlo, who had shouted, “The Carbonaro king!”

“Carlo, my son, I will lean on your arm. On your mouth were better,” Agostino added, under his voice, as they moved on.

“Oh, but,” Carlo remonstrated, “let us trust somebody. Milan has made me sick of late. I like the look of that fellow.”

“You allow yourself, my Carlo, an immense indulgence in permitting yourself to like the look of anything. Now, listen—Viva Carlo Alberto!”

The old man rang out the loyal salutation spiritedly, and awoke a prompt response from the mountaineer, who sounded his voice wide in the keen upper air.

“There's the heart of that fellow!” said Agostino. “He has but one idea—his king! If you confound it, he takes you for

an enemy. These free mountain breezes intoxicate you. You would embrace the king himself if you met him here."

"I swear I would never be guilty of the bad joke of crying a 'Viva' to him anywhere upon earth," Carlo replied. "I offend you," he said quickly.

The old man was smiling.

"Agostino Balderini is too notoriously a bad joker to be offended by the comments of the perfectly sensible, boy of mine! My limbs were stiff, and the first three steps from a place of rest reminded me acutely of the king's five years of hospitality. He has saved me from all fatigue so long, that the necessity to exercise these old joints of mine touched me with a grateful sense of his royal bounty. I had from him a chair, a bed, and a table: shelter from sun and from all silly chatter. Now I want a chair or a bed. I should like to sit at a table; the sun burns me; my ears are afflicted. I cry 'Viva!' to him that I may be in harmony with the coming chorus of Italy, which I prophetically hear. That young fellow, in whom you confide so much, speaks for his country. We poor units must not be discordant. No! Individual opinion, my Carlo, is discord when there is a general delirium. The tide arriving, let us make the best of the tide. My voice is wisdom. We shall have to follow this king!"

"Shall we!" uttered one behind them gruffly. "When I see this king swallow one ounce of Austrian lead, I shall not be sorry to follow him!"

"Right, my dear Ugo," said Agostino, turning round to him; "and I will then compose his hymn of praise. He has swallowed enough of Austrian bread. He took an Austrian wife to his bed. Who knows? he may some day declare a

preference for Austrian lead. But we shall have to follow him, or stay at home drivelling."

Agostino raised his eyes, that were glazed with the great heat of his frame.

"Oh, that, like our Dante, I had lived in the days when souls were damned! Then would I uplift another shout, believe me! As things go now, we must allow the traitor to hope for his own future, and we simply shrug. We cannot plant him neck-deep for everlasting in a burning marl, and hear him howling. We have no weapons in these times—none! Our curses come back to roost. This is one of the serious facts of the century, and controls violent language. What! are you all gathered about me? Oracles must be moving, too. There's no rest even for them, when they have got a mountain to scale."

A cry, "He is there!" and "Do you see him?" burst from the throats of men surrounding Agostino.

Looking up to the mountain's top, they had perceived the figure of one who stood with folded arms, sufficiently near for the person of an expected friend to be descried. They waved their hats, and Carlo shot ahead. The others trod after him more deliberately, but in glad excitement, speculating on the time which this sixth member of the party, who were engaged to assemble at a certain hour of the morning upon yonder height, had taken to reach the spot from Omegna, or Orta, or Pella, and rejoicing that his health should be so stout in despite of his wasting labours under city smoke.

"Yes, health!" said Agostino. "Is it health, do you think? It's the heart of the man! and a heart with a mill-stone

about it—a heart to breed a country from! There stands the man who has faith in Italy, though she has been lying like a corpse for centuries. God bless him! He has no other comfort. Viva l'Italia!”

The exclamation went up, and was acknowledged by him on the eminence overhanging them; but at a repetition of it his hand smote the air sideways. They understood the motion, and were silent; while he, until Carlo breathed his name in his hearing, eyed the great scene stedfastly, with the absorbing simple passion of one who has endured long exile, and finds his clustered visions of it confronting the strange, beloved, visible life:—the lake in the arms of giant mountains: the far-spreading hazy plain; the hanging forests; the pointed crags; the gleam of the distant rose-shadowed snows that stretch for ever like an airy host, mystically clad, and baffling the eye as with the motions of a flight toward the underlying purple land.

CHAPTER II

Table of Contents

He was a man of middle stature, thin, and even frail, as he stood defined against the sky; with the complexion of the student, and the student's aspect. The attentive droop of his shoulders and head, the straining of the buttoned coat across his chest, the air as of one who waited and listened, which distinguished his figure, detracted from the promise of other than contemplative energy, until his eyes were fairly seen and felt. That is, until the observer became aware that those soft and large dark meditative eyes had taken hold of him. In them lay no abstracted student's languor, no reflex burning of a solitary lamp; but a quiet grappling force engaged the penetrating look. Gazing upon them, you were drawn in suddenly among the thousand whirring wheels of a capacious and a vigorous mind, that was both reasoning and prompt, keen of intellect, acting throughout all its machinery, and having all under full command: an orbed mind, supplying its own philosophy, and arriving at the sword-stroke by logical steps,—a mind much less supple than a soldier's; anything but the mind of a Hamlet. The eyes were dark as the forest's border is dark; not as night is dark. Under favourable lights their colour was seen to be a deep rich brown, like the chestnut, or more like the hazel-edged sunset brown which lies upon our western rivers in the winter floods, when night begins to shadow them.

The side-view of his face was an expression of classic beauty rarely now to be beheld, either in classic lands or

elsewhere. It was severe; the tender serenity of the full bow of the eyes relieved it. In profile they showed little of their intellectual quality, but what some might have thought a playful luminousness, and some a quick pulse of feeling. The chin was firm; on it, and on the upper lip, there was a clipped growth of black hair. The whole visage widened upward from the chin, though not very markedly before it reached the broad-lying brows. The temples were strongly indented by the swelling of the forehead above them: and on both sides of the head there ran a pregnant ridge, such as will sometimes lift men a deplorable half inch above the earth we tread. If this man was a problem to others, he was none to himself; and when others called him an idealist, he accepted the title, reading himself, notwithstanding, as one who was less flighty than many philosophers and professedly practical teachers of his generation. He saw far, and he grasped ends beyond obstacles: he was nourished by sovereign principles; he despised material present interests; and, as I have said, he was less supple than a soldier. If the title of idealist belonged to him, we will not immediately decide that it was opprobrious. The idealized conception of stern truths played about his head certainly for those who knew and who loved it. Such a man, perceiving a devout end to be reached, might prove less scrupulous in his course, possibly, and less remorseful, than revolutionary Generals. His smile was quite unclouded, and came softly as a curve in water. It seemed to flow with, and to pass in and out of, his thoughts, to be a part of his emotion and his meaning when it shone transiently full. For as he had an orbed mind, so had he an orbed nature. The

passions were absolutely in harmony with the intelligence. He had the English manner; a remarkable simplicity contrasting with the demonstrative outcries and gesticulations of his friends when they joined him on the height. Calling them each by name, he received their caresses and took their hands; after which he touched the old man's shoulder.

“Agostino, this has breathed you?”

“It has; it has, my dear and best one!” Agostino replied. “But here is a good market-place for air. Down below we have to scramble for it in the mire. The spies are stifling down below. I don't know my own shadow. I begin to think that I am important. Footing up a mountain corrects the notion somewhat. Yonder, I believe, I see the Grisons, where Freedom sits. And there's the Monte della Disgrazia. Carlo Alberto should be on the top of it, but he is invisible. I do not see that Unfortunate.”

“No,” said Carlo Ammiani, who chimed to his humour more readily than the rest, and affected to inspect the Grisons' peak through a diminutive opera-glass. “No, he is not there.”

“Perhaps, my son, he is like a squirrel, and is careful to run up t'other side of the stem. For he is on that mountain; no doubt of it can exist even in the Boeotian mind of one of his subjects; myself, for example. It will be an effulgent fact when he gains the summit.”

The others meantime had thrown themselves on the grass at the feet of their manifestly acknowledged leader, and looked up for Agostino to explode the last of his train of conceits. He became aware that the moment for serious talk

had arrived, and bent his body, groaning loudly, and uttering imprecations against him whom he accused of being the promoter of its excruciating stiffness, until the ground relieved him of its weight. Carlo continued standing, while his eyes examined restlessly the slopes just surmounted by them, and occasionally the deep descent over the green-glowing Orta Lake. It was still early morning. The heat was tempered by a cool breeze that came with scents of thyme. They had no sight of human creature anywhere, but companionship of Alps and birds of upper air; and though not one of them seasoned the converse with an exclamation of joy and of blessings upon a place of free speech and safety, the thought was in their hunted bosoms, delicious as a woodland rivulet that sings only to the leaves overshadowing it.

They were men who had sworn to set a nation free,—free from the foreigner, to begin with.

(He who tells this tale is not a partisan; he would deal equally toward all. Of strong devotion, of stout nobility, of unswerving faith and self-sacrifice, he must approve; and when these qualities are displayed in a contest of forces, the wisdom of means employed, or of ultimate views entertained, may be questioned and condemned; but the men themselves may not be.)

These men had sworn their oath, knowing the meaning of it, and the nature of the Fury against whom men who stand voluntarily pledged to any great resolve must thenceforward match themselves. Many of the original brotherhood had fallen, on the battle-field, on the glacis, or in the dungeon. All present, save the youthfuller Carlo, had suffered.

Imprisonment and exile marked the Chief. Ugo Corte, of Bergamo, had seen his family swept away by the executioner and pecuniary penalties. Thick scars of wounds covered the body and disfigured the face of Giulio Bandinelli. Agostino had crawled but half-a-year previously out of his Piedmontese cell, and Marco Sana, the Brescian, had in such a place tasted of veritable torture. But if the calamity of a great oath was upon them, they had now in their faithful prosecution of it the support which it gives. They were unwearied; they had one object; the mortal anguish they had gone through had left them no sense for regrets. Life had become the field of an endless engagement to them; and as in battle one sees beloved comrades struck down, and casts but a glance at their prostrate forms, they heard the mention of a name, perchance, and with a word or a sign told what was to be said of a passionate glorious heart at rest, thanks to Austrian or vassal-Sardinian mercy.

So they lay there and discussed their plans.

“From what quarter do you apprehend the surprise?” Ugo Corte glanced up from the maps and papers spread along the grass to question Carlo ironically, while the latter appeared to be keeping rigid watch over the safety of the position. Carlo puffed the smoke of a cigarette rapidly, and Agostino replied for him:—“From the quarter where the best donkeys are to be had.”

It was supposed that Agostino had resumed the habit usually laid aside by him for the discussion of serious matters, and had condescended to father a coarse joke; but his eyes showed no spark of their well-known twinkling

solicitation for laughter, and Carlo spoke in answer gravely: —“From Baveno it will be.”

“From Baveno! They might as well think to surprise hawks from Baveno. Keep watch, dear Ammiani; a good start in a race is a kick from the Gods.”

With that, Corte turned to the point of his finger on the map. He conceived it possible that Carlo Ammiani, a Milanese, had reason to anticipate the approach of people by whom he, or they, might not wish to be seen. Had he studied Carlo's face he would have been reassured. The brows of the youth were open, and his eyes eager with expectation, that showed the flying forward of the mind, and nothing of knotted distrust or wary watchfulness. Now and then he would move to the other side of the mountain, and look over upon Orta; or with the opera-glass clasped in one hand beneath an arm, he stopped in his sentinel-march, frowning reflectively at a word put to him, as if debating within upon all the bearings of it; but the only answer that came was a sharp assent, given after the manner of one who dealt conscientiously in definite affirmatives; and again the glass was in requisition. Marco Sana was a fighting soldier, who stated what he knew, listened, and took his orders. Giulio Bandinelli was also little better than the lieutenant in an enterprise. Corte, on the other hand, had the conspirator's head,—a head like a walnut, bulging above the ears,—and the man was of a sallying temper. He lay there putting bit by bit of his plot before the Chief for his approval, with a careful construction, that upon the expression of any doubt of its working smoothly in the

streets of Milan, caused him to shout a defensive, “But Carlo says yes!”

This uniform character of Ammiani's replies, and the smile of Agostino on hearing them, had begun to strike the attention of the soldierly Marco Sana. He ran his hand across his shorn head, and puffed his burnt red mole-spotted cheeks, with a sidelong stare at the abstracted youth, “Said yes!” he remarked. “He might say no, for a diversion. He has yeses enough in his pay to earn a Cardinal's hat. 'Is Milan preparing to rise?' 'Yes.'—'Is she ready for the work?' 'Yes.'—'Is the garrison on its guard?' 'Yes.'—'Have you seen Barto Rizzo?' 'Yes.'—'Have the people got the last batch of arms?' 'Yes.'—And 'Yes,' the secret is well kept; 'Yes,' Barto Rizzo is steadily getting them together. We may rely on him: Carlo is his intimate friend: Yes, Yes:—There's a regiment of them at your service, and you may shuffle them as you will. This is the help we get from Milan: a specimen of what we may expect!”

Sana had puffed himself hot, and now blew for coolness.

“You are,”—Agostino addressed him,—“philosophically totally wrong, my Marco. Those affirmatives are fat worms for the catching of fish. They are the real pretty fruit of the Hesperides. Personally, you or I may be irritated by them: but I'm not sure they don't please us. Were Carlo a woman, of course he should learn to say no;—as he will now if I ask him, Is she in sight? I won't do it, you know; but as a man and a diplomatist, it strikes me that he can't say yes too often.”

“Answer me, Count Ammiani, and do me the favour to attend to these trifles for the space of two minutes,” said

Corte. “Have you seen Barto Rizzo? Is he acting for Medole?”

“As mole, as reindeer, and as bloody northern Raven!” ejaculated Agostino: “perhaps to be jackal, by-and-by. But I do not care to abuse our Barto Rizzo, who is a prodigy of nature, and has, luckily for himself, embraced a good cause, for he is certain to be hanged if he is not shot. He has the prophetic owl's face. I have always a fancy of his hooting his own death-scrip. I wrong our Barto:—Medole would be the jackal, if it lay between the two.”

Carlo Ammiani had corrected Corte's manner to him by a complacent readiness to give him distinct replies. He then turned and set off at full speed down the mountain.

“She is sighted at last,” Agostino murmured, and added rapidly some spirited words under his breath to the Chief, whose chin was resting on his doubled hand.

Corte, Marco, and Giulio were full of denunciations against Milan and the Milanese, who had sent a boy to their councils. It was Brescia and Bergamo speaking in their jealousy, but Carlo's behaviour was odd, and called for reproof. He had come as the deputy of Milan to meet the Chief, and he had not spoken a serious word on the great business of the hour, though the plot had been unfolded, the numbers sworn to, and Brescia, and Bergamo, and Cremona, and Venice had spoken upon all points through their emissaries, the two latter cities being represented by Sana and Corte.

“We've had enough of this lad,” said Corte. “His laundress is following him with a change of linen, I suppose, or it's a scent-bottle. He's an admirable representative of

the Lombard metropolis!” Corte drawled out the words in prodigious mimicry. “If Milan has nothing better to send than such a fellow, we'll finish without her, and shame the beast that she is. She has been always a treacherous beast!”

“Poor Milan!” sighed the Chief; “she lies under the beak of the vulture, and has twice been devoured; but she has a soul: she proves it. Ammiani, too, will prove his value. I have no doubt of him. As to boys, or even girls, you know my faith is in the young. Through them Italy lives. What power can teach devotion to the old?”

“I thank you, signore,” Agostino gesticulated.

“But, tell me, when did you learn it, my friend?”

In answer, Agostino lifted his hand a little boy's height from the earth.

The old man then said: “I am afraid, my dear Corte, you must accept the fellowship of a girl as well as of a boy upon this occasion. See! our Carlo! You recognize that dancing speck below there?—he has joined himself—the poor lad wishes he could, I dare swear!—to another bigger speck, which is verily a lady: who has joined herself to a donkey—a common habit of the sex, I am told; but I know them not. That lady, signor Ugo, is the signorina Vittoria. You stare? But, I tell you, the game cannot go on without her; and that is why I have permitted you to knock the ball about at your own pleasure for these forty minutes.”

Corte drew his under-lip on his reddish stubble moustache. “Are we to have women in a conference?” he asked from eye to eye.

“Keep to the number, Ugo; and moreover, she is not a woman, but a noble virgin. I discern a distinction, though

you may not. The Vestal's fire burns straight.”

“Who is she?”

“It rejoices me that she should be so little known. All the greater the illumination when her light shines out! The signorina Vittoria is a cantatrice who is about to appear upon the boards.”

“Ah! that completes it.” Corte rose to his feet with an air of desperation. “We require to be refreshed with quavers and crescendos and trillets! Who ever knew a singer that cared an inch of flesh for her country? Money, flowers, flattery, vivas! but, money! money! and Austrian as good as Italian. I've seen the accursed wenches bow gratefully for Austrian bouquets:—bow? ay, and more; and when the Austrian came to them red with our blood. I spit upon their polluted cheeks! They get us an ill name wherever they go. These singers have no country. One—I knew her—betrayed Filippo Mastalone, and sang the night of the day he was shot. I heard the white demon myself. I could have taken her long neck till she twisted like a serpent and hissed. May heaven forgive me for not levelling a pistol at her head! If God, my friends, had put the thought into my brain that night!”

A flush had deadened Corte's face to the hue of nightshade.

“You thunder in a clear atmosphere, my Ugo,” returned the old man, as he fell back calmly at full length.

“And who is this signorina Vittoria?” cried Corte.

“A cantatrice who is about to appear upon the boards, as I have already remarked: of La Scala, let me add, if you hold it necessary.”

“And what does she do here?”

“Her object in coming, my friend? Her object in coming is, first, to make her reverence to one who happens to be among us this day; and secondly, but principally, to submit a proposition to him and to us.”

“What's her age?” Corte sneered.

“According to what calendar would you have it reckoned? Wisdom would say sixty: Father Chronos might divide that by three, and would get scarce a month in addition, hungry as he is for her, and all of us! But Minerva's handmaiden has no age. And now, dear Ugo, you have your opportunity to denounce her as a convicted screecher by night. Do so.”

Corte turned his face to the Chief, and they spoke together for some minutes: after which, having had names of noble devoted women, dead and living, cited to him, in answer to brutal bellowings against that sex, and hearing of the damsel under debate as one who was expected and was welcome, he flung himself upon the ground again, inviting calamity by premature resignation. Giulio Bandinelli stretched his hand for Carlo's glass, and spied the approach of the signorina.

“Dark,” he said.

“A jewel of that complexion,” added Agostino, by way of comment.

“She has scorching eyes.”

“She may do mischief; she may do mischief; let it be only on the right Side!”

“She looks fat.”

“She sits doubled up and forward, don't you see, to relieve the poor donkey. You, my Giulio, would call a swan

fat if the neck were not always on the stretch.”

“By Bacchus! what a throat she has!”

“And well interjected, Giulio! It runs down like wine, like wine, to the little ebbing and flowing wave! Away with the glass, my boy! You must trust to all that's best about you to spy what's within. She makes me young—young!”

Agostino waved his hand in the form of a salute to her on the last short ascent. She acknowledged it gracefully; and talking at intervals to Carlo Ammiani, who footed briskly by her side, she drew by degrees among the eyes fixed on her, some of which were not gentle; but hers were for the Chief, at whose feet, when dismounted by Ammiani's solicitous aid, she would have knelt, had he not seized her by her elbows, and put his lips to her cheek.

“The signorina Vittoria, gentlemen,” said Agostino.

CHAPTER III

Table of Contents

The old man had introduced her with much of the pride of a father displaying some noble child of his for the first time to admiring friends.

“She is one of us,” he pursued; “a daughter of Italy! My daughter also; is it not so?”

He turned to her as for a confirmation. The signorina pressed his fingers. She was a little intimidated, and for the moment seemed shy and girlish. The shade of her broad straw hat partly concealed her vivid features.

“Now, gentlemen, if you please, the number is complete, and we may proceed to business,” said Agostino, formally but as he conducted the signorina to place her at the feet of the Chief, she beckoned to her servant, who was holding the animal she had ridden. He came up to her, and presented himself in something of a military posture of attention to her commands. These were that he should take the poor brute to water, and then lead him back to Baveno, and do duty in waiting upon her mother. The first injunction was received in a decidedly acquiescent manner. On hearing the second, which directed his abandonment of his post of immediate watchfulness over her safety, the man flatly objected with a “Signorina, no.”

He was a handsome bright-eyed fellow, with a soldier's frame and a smile as broad and beaming as laughter, indicating much of that mixture of acuteness, and simplicity which is a characteristic of the South, and means no more

than that the extreme vivacity of the blood exceeds at times that of the brain.

A curious frown of half-amused astonishment hung on the signorina's face.

“When I tell you to go, Beppo!”

At once the man threw out his fingers, accompanied by an amazingly voluble delivery of his reasons for this revolt against her authority. Among other things, he spoke of an oath sworn by him to a foreign gentleman, his patron,—for whom, and for whomsoever he loved, he was ready to pour forth his heart's blood,—to the effect that he would never quit her side when she left the roof of her house.

“You see, Beppo,” she remonstrated, “I am among friends.”

Beppo gave a sweeping bow, but remained firm where he stood. Ammiani cast a sharp hard look at the man.

“Do you hear the signorina's orders?”

“I hear them, signore.”

“Will you obey them?”

She interposed. “He must not hear quick words. Beppo is only showing his love for his master and for me. But you are wrong in this case, my Beppo. You shall give me your protection when I require it; and now, you are sensible, and must understand that it is not wanted. I tell you to go.”

Beppo read the eyes of his young mistress.

“Signorina,”—he stooped forward mysteriously, —“signorina, that fellow is in Baveno. I saw him this morning.”

“Good, good. And now go, my friend.”

“The signor Agostino,” he remarked loudly, to attract the old man; “the signor Agostino may think proper to advise you.”

“The signor Agostino will laugh at nothing that you say to-day, Beppo. You will obey me. Go at once,” she repeated, seeing him on tiptoe to gain Agostino's attention.

Beppo knew by her eyes that her ears were locked against him; and, though she spoke softly, there was an imperiousness in her voice not to be disregarded. He showed plainly by the lost rigidity of his attitude that he was beaten and perplexed. Further expostulations being disregarded, he turned his head to look at the poor panting beast under his charge, and went slowly up to him: they walked off together, a crest-fallen pair.

“You have gained the victory, signorina,” said Ugo Corte.

She replied, smiling, “My poor Beppo! it's not difficult to get the best of those who love us.”

“Ha!” cried Agostino; “here is one of their secrets, Carlo. Take heed of it, my boy. We shall have queens when kings are fossils, mark me!”

Ammiani muttered a courtly phrase, whereat Corte yawned in very grim fashion.

The signorina had dropped to the grass, at a short step from the Chief, to whom her face was now seriously given. In Ammiani's sight she looked a dark Madonna, with the sun shining bright gold through the edges of the summer hat, thrown back from her head. The full and steady contemplative eyes had taken their fixed expression, after a vanishing affectionate gaze of an instant cast upon Agostino. Attentive as they were, light played in them like

water. The countenance was vivid in repose. She leaned slightly forward, clasping the wrist of one hand about her knee, and the sole of one little foot showed from under her dress.

Deliberately, but with no attempt at dramatic impressiveness, the Chief began to speak. He touched upon the condition of Italy, and the new lilt animating her young men and women. “I have heard many good men jeer,” he said, “at our taking women to our counsel, accepting their help, and putting a great stake upon their devotion. You have read history, and you know what women can accomplish. They may be trained, equally as we are, to venerate the abstract idea of country, and be a sacrifice to it. Without their aid, and the fire of a fresh life being kindled in their bosoms, no country that has lain like ours in the death-trance can revive. In the death-trance, I say, for Italy does not die!”

“True,” said other voices.

“We have this belief in the eternal life of our country, and the belief is the life itself. But let no strong man among us despise the help of women. I have seen our cause lie desperate, and those who despaired of it were not women. Women kept the flame alive. They worship in the temple of the cause.”

Ammiani's eyes dwelt fervidly upon the signorina. Her look, which was fastened upon the Chief, expressed a mind that listened to strange matter concerning her very little. But when the plans for the rising of the Bergamascs and Brescians, the Venetians, the Bolognese, the Milanese, all the principal Northern cities, were recited, with a practical