

# Duke Virgil

By Richard Garnett

## I

The citizens of Mantua were weary of revolutions. They had acknowledged the suzerainty of the Emperor Frederick and shaken it off. They had had a Podestà of their own and had shaken him off. They had expelled a Papal Legate, incurring excommunication thereby. They had tried dictators, consuls, prætors, councils of ten, and other numbers odd and even, and ere the middle of the thirteenth century were luxuriating in the enjoyment of perfect anarchy.

An assembly met daily in quest of a remedy, but its members were forbidden to propose anything old, and were unable to invent anything new.

“Why not consult Manto, the alchemist’s daughter, our prophetess, our Sibyl?” the young Benedetto asked at last.

“Why not?” repeated Eustachio, an elderly man.

“Why not, indeed?” interrogated Leonardo, a man of mature years.

All the speakers were noble. Benedetto was Manto’s lover; Eustachio her father’s friend; Leonardo his creditor. Their advice prevailed, and the three were chosen as a deputation to wait on the prophetess. Before proceeding formally on their embassy the three envoys managed to obtain private interviews, the two elder with Manto’s father, the youth with Manto herself. The creditor promised that if he became Duke by the alchemist’s influence with his daughter he would forgive the debt; the friend went further, and vowed that he would pay it. The old man promised his good word to both, but when he went to confer with his daughter he found her closeted with Benedetto, and returned without disburdening himself of his errand. The youth had just risen from his knees, pleading with her, and drawing glowing pictures of their felicity when he should be Duke and she Duchess.

She answered, “Benedetto, in all Mantua there is not one man fit to rule another. To name any living person would be to set a tyrant over my native city. I will repair to the shades and seek a ruler among the dead.”

“And why should not Mantua have a tyrant?” demanded Benedetto. “The freedom of the mechanic is the bondage of the noble, who values no liberty save that of making the base-born do his bidding. ’Tis hell to a man of spirit to be contradicted by his tailor. If I could see my heart’s desire on the knaves, little would I reckon submitting to the sway of the Emperor.”

“I know that well, Benedetto,” said Manto, “and hence will take good heed not to counsel Mantua to choose thee. No, the Duke I will give her shall be one without passions to gratify or injuries to avenge, and shall already be crowned with a crown to make the ducal cap as nothing in his eyes, if eyes he had.”

Benedetto departed in hot displeasure, and the alchemist came forward to announce that the commissioners waited.

“My projection,” he whispered, “only wants one more piece of gold to insure success, and Eustachio proffers thirty. Oh, give him Mantua in exchange for boundless riches!”

“And they call thee a philosopher and me a visionary!” said Manto, patting his cheek.

The envoys’ commission having been unfolded, she took not a moment to reply, “Be your Duke Virgil.”

The deputation respectfully represented that although Virgil was no doubt Mantua's greatest citizen, he laboured under the disqualification of having been dead more than twelve hundred years. Nothing further, however, could be extorted from the prophetess, and the ambassadors were obliged to withdraw.

The interpretation of Manto's oracle naturally provoked much diversity of opinion in the council.

"Obviously," said a poet, "the prophetess would have us confer the ducal dignity upon the contemporary bard who doth most nearly accede to the vestiges of the divine Maro; and he, as I judge, is even now in the midst of you."

"Virgil the poet," said a priest, who had long laboured under the suspicion of occult practices, "was a fool to Virgil the enchanter. The wise woman evidently demands one competent to put the devil into a hole—an operation which I have striven to perform all my life."

"Canst thou balance our city upon an egg?" inquired Eustachio.

"Better upon an egg than upon a quack!" retorted the priest.

But such was not the opinion of Eustachio himself, who privately conferred with Leonardo. Eustachio had a character, but no parts; Leonardo had parts, but no character.

"I see not why these fools should deride the oracle of the prophetess," he said. "She would doubtless impress upon us that a dead master is in divers respects preferable to a living one."

"Surely," said Eustachio, "provided always that the servant is a man of exemplary character, and that he presumes not upon his lord's withdrawal to another sphere, trusting thereby to commit malpractices with impunity, but doth, on the contrary, deport himself as ever in his great taskmaster's eye."

"Eustachio," said Leonardo, with admiration, "it is the misery of Mantua that she hath no citizen who can act half as well as thou canst talk. I would fain have further discourse with thee."

The two statesmen laid their heads together, and ere long the mob were crying, "A Virgil! a Virgil!"

The councillors reassembled and passed resolutions.

"But who shall be Regent?" inquired some one when Virgil had been elected unanimously.

"Who but we?" asked Eustachio and Leonardo. "Are we not the heads of the Virgilian party?"

Thus had the enthusiastic Manto, purest of idealists, installed in authority the two most unprincipled politicians in the republic; and she had lost her lover besides, for Benedetto fled the city, vowing vengeance.

Anyhow, the dead poet was enthroned Duke of Mantua; Eustachio and Leonardo became Regents, with the style of Consuls, and it was provided that in doubtful cases reference should be made to the *Sortes Virgilianæ*. And truly, if we may believe the chronicles, the arrangement worked for a time surprisingly well. The Mantuans, in an irrational way, had done what it behoves all communities to do rationally if they can. They had sought for a good and worthy citizen to rule them; it was their misfortune that such a one could only be found among the dead. They felt prouder of themselves for being governed by a great man—one in comparison with whom kings and pontiffs were the creatures of a day. They would not, if they could help it, disgrace themselves by disgracing their hero; they would not have it said that Mantua, which had not been too weak to bear him, had been too weak to endure his government. The very hucksters and usurers among them felt dimly that there was such a thing as an Ideal. A glimmering perception dawned upon mailed, steel-fisted barons that there was a such a thing as an Idea, and they felt uneasily apprehensive, like beasts of prey who have for the first time sniffed gunpowder. The railleries and mockeries of Mantua's neighbours, moreover, stimulated

Mantua's citizens to persevere in their course, and deterred them from doing aught to approve themselves fools. Were not Verona, Cremona, Lodi, Pavia, Crema, cities that could never enthrone the Virgil they had never produced, watching with undissembled expectation to see them trip? The hollow-hearted Eustachio and the rapacious Leonardo, their virtual rulers, might indeed be little sensible to this enthusiasm, but they could not disregard the general drift of public opinion, which said clearly: "Mantua is trying a great experiment. Woe to you if you bring it to nought by your selfish quarrels!"

The best proof that there was something in Manto's idea was that after a while the Emperor Frederick took alarm, and signified to the Mantuans that they must cease their mumming and fooling and acknowledge him as their sovereign, failing which he would besiege their city.

## II

Mantua was girt by a zone of fire and steel. Her villas and homesteads flamed or smoked; her orchards flared heavenward in a torrent of sparks or stood black sapless trunks charred to their inmost pith; the promise of her harvests lay as grey ashes over the land. But her ramparts, though breached in places, were yet manned by her sons, and their assailants recoiled pierced by the shafts or stunned by the catapults of the defence. Kaiser Frederick sat in his tent, giving secret audience to one who had stolen in disguise over from the city in the grey of the morning. By the Emperor's side stood a tall martial figure, wearing a visor which he never removed.

"Your Majesty," Leonardo was saying, for it was he, "this madness will soon pass away. The people will weary of sacrificing themselves for a dead heathen."

"And Liberty?" asked the Emperor, "is not that a name dear to those misguided creatures?"

"So dear, please your Majesty, that if they have but the name they will perfectly dispense with the thing. I do not advise that your imperial yoke should be too palpably adjusted to their stiff necks. Leave them in appearance the choice of their magistrate, but insure its falling upon one of approved fidelity, certain to execute obsequiously all your Majesty's mandates; such a one in short, as your faithful vassal Leonardo. It would only be necessary to decapitate that dangerous revolutionist, Eustachio."

"And the citizens are really ready for this?"

"All the respectable citizens. All of whom your Majesty need take account. All men of standing and substance."

"I rejoice to hear it," said the Emperor, "and do the more readily credit thee inasmuch as a most virtuous and honourable citizen hath already been beforehand with thee, assuring me of the same thing, and affirming that but one traitor, whose name, methinks, sounded like thine, stands between me and the subjugation of Mantua."

And, withdrawing a curtain, he disclosed the figure of Eustachio.

"I thought he was asleep," muttered Eustachio.

"That noodle to have been beforehand with me!" murmured Leonardo.

"What perplexes me," continued Frederick, after enjoying the confusion of the pair for a few moments, "is that our masked friend here will have it that *he* is the man for the Dukedom, and offers to open the gates to me by a method of his own."

"By fair fighting, an' please my liege," observed the visored personage, "not by these dastardly treacheries."

"How inhuman!" sighed Eustachio.

"How old-fashioned!" sneered Leonardo.

“The truth is,” continued Frederick, “he gravely doubts whether either of you possesses the influence which you allege, and has devised a method of putting this to the proof, which I trust will commend itself to you.”

Leonardo and Eustachio expressed their readiness to submit their credit with their fellow-citizens to any reasonable trial.

“He proposes, then,” pursued the Emperor, “that ye, disarmed and bound, should be placed at the head of the storming column, and in that situation should, as question-less ye would, exert your entire moral influence with your fellow-citizens to dissuade them from shooting you. If the column, thus shielded, enters the city without resistance, ye will both have earned the Dukedom, and the question who shall have it may be decided by single combat between yourselves. But should the people, rather than submit to our clemency, impiously slay their zlected magistrates, it will be apparent that the methods of our martial friend are the only ones corresponding to the exigency of the case. Is the storming column ready?”

“All but the first file, please your Majesty,” responded the man in the visor.

“Let it be equipped,” returned Frederick, and in half-an-hour Eustachio and Leonardo, their hands tied behind them, were stumbling up the breach, impelled by pikes in the rear, and confronting the catapults, *chevaux de frise*, hidden pitfalls, Greek fire, and boiling water provided by their own direction, and certified to them the preceding evening as all that could be desired. They had, however, the full use of their voices, and this they turned to the best account. Never had Leonardo been so cogent, or Eustachio so pathetic. The Mantuans, already disorganised by the unaccountable disappearance of the Executive, were entirely irresolute what to do. As they hesitated the visored chief incited his followers. All seemed lost, when a tall female figure appeared among the defenders. It was Manto.

“Fools and cowards!” she exclaimed, “must ye learn your duty from a woman?”

And, seizing a catapult, she discharged a stone which laid the masked warrior stunned and senseless on the ground. The next instant Eustachio and Leonardo fell dead, pierced by showers of arrows. The Mantuans sallied forth. The dismayed Imperialists fled to their camp. The bodies of the fallen magistrates and of the unconscious chieftain in the mask were brought into the city. Manto herself undid the fallen man’s visor, and uttered a fearful shriek as she recognised Benedetto.

“What shall be done with him, mistress?” they asked.

Manto long stood silent, torn by conflicting emotions. At length she said, in a strange, unnatural voice:

“Put him into the Square Tower.”

“And now, mistress, what further? How to choose the new consuls?”

“Ask me no more,” she said. “I shall never prophesy again. Virtue has gone away from me.”

The leaders departed, to intrigue for the vacant posts, and devise tortures for Benedetto. Manto sat on the rampart, still and silent as its stones. Anon she rose, and roved about as if distraught, reciting verses from Virgil.

Night had fallen. Benedetto lay wakeful in his cell. A female figure stood before him bearing a lamp. It was Manto.

“Benedetto,” she said, “I am a wretch, faithless to my country and to my master. I did but even now open his sacred volume at hazard, and on what did my eye first fall?”

Trojaque nunc stares, Priamique arx alta maneres.

But I can no other. I am a woman. May Mantua never entrust her fortunes to the like of me again! Come with me, I will release thee.”

She unlocked his chains; she guided him through the secret passage under the moat; they stood at the exit, in the open air.

“Fly,” she said, “and never again draw sword against thy mother. I will return to my house, and do that to myself which it behoved me to have done ere I released thee.”

“Manto,” exclaimed Benedetto, “a truce to this folly! Forsake thy dead Duke, and that cheat of Liberty more crazy and fantastic still. Wed a living Duke in me!”

“Never!” exclaimed Manto. “I love thee more than any man living on earth, and I would not espouse thee if the earth held no other.”

“Thou canst not help thyself,” he rejoined; “thou hast revealed to me the secret of this passage. I hasten to the camp. I return in an hour with an army, and wilt thou, wilt thou not, to-morrow’s sun shall behold thee the partner of my throne!”

Manto wore a poinard. She struck Benedetto to the heart, and he fell dead. She drew the corpse back into the passage, and hurried to her home. Opening her master’s volume again, she read:

Tædet Coeli Convexa tueri.

A few minutes afterwards her father entered the chamber to tell her he had at last found the philosopher’s stone, but, perceiving his daughter hanging by her girdle, he forbore to intrude upon her, and returned to his laboratory.

It was time. A sentinel of the besiegers had marked Benedetto’s fall, and the disappearance of the body into the earth. A pool of blood revealed the entrance to the passage. Ere sunrise Mantua was full of Frederick’s soldiers, full also of burning houses, rifled sanctuaries, violated damsels, children playing with their dead mothers’ breasts, especially full of citizens protesting that they had ever longed for the restoration of the Emperor, and that this was the happiest day of their lives. Frederick waited till everybody was killed, then entered the city and proclaimed an amnesty. Virgil’s bust was broken, and his writings burned with Manto’s body. The flames glowed on the dead face, which gleamed as it were with pleasure. The old alchemist had been slain among his crucibles; *his* scrolls were preserved with jealous care.

But Manto found another father. She sat at Virgil’s feet in Elysium; and as he stroked the fair head, now golden with perpetual youth, listened to his mild reproofs and his cheerful oracles. By her side stood a bowl filled with the untasted waters of Lethe.

“Woe,” said Virgil—but his manner contradicted his speech—“woe to the idealist and enthusiast! Woe to them who live in the world to come! Woe to them who live only for a hope whose fulfilment they will not behold on earth! Drink not, therefore, of that cup, dear child, lest Duke Virgil’s day should come, and thou shouldst not know it. For come it will, and all the sooner for thy tragedy and thy comedy.”