



BRAVO FOR THE BRIDE

An Italian Renaissance whodunnit

ELIZABETH EYRE

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Elizabeth Eyre

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The People in the Story

In Borgo

Galeotto, Prince of Borgo

Ariana of Altamura, Prince Galeotto's bride

Prince-Bishop Gioffré, Abbot of Borgo

Lady Leonora

Lady Zima } Prince Galeotto's mistresses

In Venosta

Duke Vincenzo

Duchess Dorotea, his wife

Ristoni, a rich merchant

Madonna Ristoni, his mother

Mario Marietti, an engineer

Rodrigo Salazzo, a brigand

In Altamura

Duke Ippolyto

Duchess Violante, his wife

Lord Andrea and Lady Camilla, their children

The children's Nurse

Lord Tebaldo, cousin to the Duchess

Bonifaccio Valori, the Duke's chief counsellor

Tristano Valori, Bonifaccio's son

Polidoro Tedesco, a philosopher

Atzo Orcagna }
Cola Borsieri } his pupils
Onorio Scudo
Poggio, dwarf to the Duchess
Nuto Baccardi }
Stefano Cipolla } landlords of lodgings

In Transit

Pietro Brunelli, an architect
Master Valentino, a doctor
Pyrrho, a professional
Sigismondo, a soldier of fortune
Benno, his servant
Biondello, a dog

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Chapter One

A complete Quintilian

‘And a man died for this?’

‘Men have died for very much less, as you well know, my son.’ The Abbot’s long fingers hovered over the page, not quite touching the parchment, as if he blessed the elegant writing, the coloured rondels along the borders illustrating the narrative. The fingers descended beside the book to tap the table. ‘Do you know how much this cost, my son?’

‘Apart from a man’s life?’ The speaker’s voice was deep, amused. He shrugged broad shoulders. ‘I have no idea, my lord, except that in your judgement it was worth the price.’

The Abbot sighed and stood back. A bird in the tree outside the window burst into sudden celebration of the warm morning, and he lifted his head to listen. ‘Who can say what is to be valued? I do what I can with the resources at my disposal. The Prince is not interested in the abbey library. Duke Vincenzo of Venosta, now, has no care for books but he’ll pay for them, the rarer the better.’

‘To show that he can?’

‘I imagine so.’ The Abbot’s smile transformed his austere face. He tapped the table again. ‘He has a manuscript I would – not kill for, but perhaps die for,

God forgive me. Found by one of his collectors in a monastery in south Germany. A Quintilian. *Complete!* The only one I have ever heard of, Sigismondo.'

A long, thoughtful hum greeted this. 'A complete Quintilian, my lord, must be measured by more lives than one. Who died for *that*?'

'You think too much in terms of death, my son. It's natural to you, but do not let killing occupy your thoughts nor blood stain your mind.' The Abbot was severe, but he softened as the shaven head opposite bent in acknowledgement of the reproof. 'You are a devout man, as I have seen during your stay with us. I know that you do not take pleasure in killing, as some do. Yet we must remember that those who live by the sword, die by the sword.' He shut the heavy book with care, secured the silver clasps and permitted himself to caress the crimson velvet cover. 'No, the Quintilian, as far as I know, was purchased by money only. Duke Vincenzo is a secretive man. Brother Ursino was in Venosta a few days ago on business to the Duke's librarian, and he was allowed a glimpse of the Quintilian – no touching!' The Abbot snatched his hands from the velvet book in illustration. 'For ten minutes only . . .' He sighed again and turned to look out of the window. 'How hard it is in this world not to long for other things than God.'

Down in the courtyard, two monks, their robes kilted up to their knees, dug in a centre bed of earth where herbs grew. Others walked in the shadow of the colonnade, silent, eyes down, hands under their scapulars or in their sleeves. In a sunny corner, on a stone bench, sat a small bearded man, trying to teach a very small woolly dog with one ear to walk on its hind legs with a stick in its mouth. One of the monks was paying more attention to this than to his digging, and the Abbot

frowned. Sigismondo, however, smiled.

‘Has your man – Benno, isn’t it? – profited at all from your stay here?’

The small dog took several steps on his hind legs before dropping to all fours and depositing the stick on the ground, but Benno clapped.

‘I think, my lord, that he’s succeeded in some things.’

The Abbot glanced at Sigismondo’s smiling face and remarked, more tolerantly, ‘St Paul teaches us that we must suffer fools gladly. I do not think your Benno as much of a fool as he looks, but that, like your subtlety, my son, is between him and God.’

A bell, slow and sonorous, rang out in the square tower of the great church, a small part of whose outer wall formed one side of the courtyard. The monks below stopped still for a sign of the cross and a prayer; the Abbot and Sigismondo above in almost exact synchronicity.

‘It is getting late. I must go and prepare myself.’ The Abbot looked round regretfully at the tall shelves with their heavy volumes, at the Livy in its crimson velvet on the carved cypress-wood lectern. ‘The wedding couple are to hear a Mass in the abbey once the Lady Ariana has arrived and been received by the Prince.’

‘The Duchess Violante comes as well?’

‘You know her? Yes, she escorts her stepdaughter and will be here for the week of the festivities. Duke Ippolyto honours us in sending his wife as well as his daughter—’

An outburst of clapping in the courtyard drew the Abbot’s attention. Both gardening monks, abandoning their spades, were applauding the little dog which advanced triumphantly across the cobbles, stick askew in his mouth, forepaws paddling the air.

The bearded man was the first to glance up, and in a

moment the monks were scrambling for their spades. The Abbot turned from the window and extended his hand to the tall man facing him, who went down swiftly on one knee to kiss the ring. 'We must bid you farewell, Sigismondo. It has been pleasant to see you again. When I taught you in Paris, those years ago, I did not think to see you in such a fashion here.'

'I believe you didn't think to see me ever again, in this world or the next.' Sigismondo was smiling broadly and the Abbot, responding almost gravely, inclined his head.

'I shan't ask you how you escaped hanging at that time. I hope only that you sought and received absolution for the blood you shed . . . Go in peace now. I do not adjure you to shed no more, because I am not so unworldly as to think you could obey. But may you have no occasion to shed blood during your stay in our fair city.'

Sigismondo bowed and the Abbot was gone, having voiced a wish doubtful of fulfilment.

Chapter Two

The omen

'I do love a good wedding.' Benno, his beard disgracefully greasy with vestiges of a pork fritter, beamed round at the street as they made their way along. People were already gathering in groups to secure places on the wedding procession's route. Almost any princely wedding will be a popular occasion, with such opportunities for feasting and carousing, but this one, their Prince Galeotto marrying Duke Ippolyto's daughter Ariana, was particularly pleasing to Borgo's citizens: it was good for trade, binding a neighbour state in the alliance of marriage.

Also gratifying was that Ippolyto of Altamura was not the only one to seek an alliance: Duke Vincenzo of Venosta had, everybody knew, offered his eight-year-old daughter to be Galeotto's bride. It was, all the gossips agreed, wholly sensible of their Prince to prefer the fifteen-year-old Ariana. You didn't get heirs on girls of eight without waiting around for longer than might be safe. The Prince's previous marriage had not been useful. Three daughters needing dowries were the only survivors and could not be considered a benefit. Principalities with no heir have a vulnerability no prince can afford.

'A good wedding? You sound like an old grandmother, Benno. Haven't you seen enough weddings?'

'Only two,' said Benno, aggrieved. 'I mean two royal ones.' Picking up his small woolly dog, he held him under his beard, which at once got licked with enthusiasm. 'Biondello likes a good wedding, don't you? This Prince Galeotto's done well for himself, hasn't he? Getting Duke Ippolyto's daughter. What's she like? You seen her?' Benno paused, with a clean beard and a feeling of anxiety. He might have overstepped the mark. His master had a prejudice against questions and Benno, although weak on mathematics, rather thought he had just asked three.

'Mm'mm. What she's like is what everyone here has been asking too. They seem at least to know that she has red hair.' Sigismondo pointed towards an arch that spanned the street they were climbing.

It was an ingenious structure, the framework interwoven with ivy, box and myrtle and laurel so that it looked as if it had decided to grow across the street of its own accord. Its true glory, however, was the pair of wooden figures tied into the arch at either side, facing each other. They were lifesize if not lifelike, and evidently their devisor had been at pains to represent the Prince and his bride, both of whom wore crowns of gilded wire twined with bay and flowers. The figure of the bride wore a dress of finest muslin embroidered with rosebuds, which Benno was sure was already bespoke, at some expense, to adorn a body of flesh rather than wood once the ceremonies were done. The crown had been fastened carefully to a wig of brilliant red silk whose ringlets had been teased out into a cloud upon the figure's shoulders. The people of Borgo were determined that, even if they hadn't got the shade exactly right, their new Princess should see they knew about her beautiful red hair.

As Sigismondo and Benno regarded it, the figure trembled almost as if it lived, and a man, halfway along the arch, checking the lashings that held the figure in place, put a wreath of flowers over one of the outstretched hands, and climbed down, slowly and carefully. The wooden face, large eyes painted black and small mouth red, stared at the wooden face of the Prince across the way.

The people of Borgo were confident in their representation here. The Prince's hair was but a pale shadow of his bride's, of ginger silk, only reaching to just below his wooden ears. The face was rounded, with even a suggestion of the turnip in its proportions, the nose large, the eyes small, the lower lip a generous blob. Benno stared, astonished, and turned to Sigismondo.

He breathed, 'He looks *awful*. He can't look that bad, can he?'

'Wait till you see him,' was the reply, following a long, derogatory hum. Benno reflected that, even if the Prince's effigy understated his actual appearance, it argued that his people were not so frightened of their ruler that they had to flatter him unduly. That could mean either that the Prince had a kindly nature or that he was weak.

In fact, the populace was counting on the known fact that their Prince was shortsighted, and that none of his courtiers was likely to risk injury by describing the effigy to him.

While Sigismondo and Benno contemplated his likeness, Prince Galeotto was getting dressed. What Nature takes away with one hand, she bestows with the other. The accident of birth had given Galeotto his face and figure; neither would have won him much admiration had they not come along with other gifts of

birth: the principality of Borgo and its overflowing coffers. True, he was not as rich as Duke Ippolyto whose daughter he was marrying, but he was rich enough to afford the quantity of rubies, diamonds and sapphires tastefully incorporated into the embroidery of his doublet. On the ginger hair, which was already retreating as if in despair at the features below, he wore a large scarlet velvet hat trimmed with bullion that glittered as he turned his head to and fro to judge the effect in a mirror held up by a page.

He was satisfied, seeing not his looks but his wealth. In the right hands, it could be made to last a lifetime, which looks never can. It did not cross his mind that his bride might be disappointed. She had received his portrait in the course of the marriage negotiations, as he had received hers. Although the freckles had been left out on hers, his showed him as he had been in his late teens, two stone lighter and two chins less, the ginger hair in thick supply – more a Platonic ideal of himself than the real thing. All the same, daughters of dukes can no more be choosers than beggars can; the Lady Ariana was marrying money and should be glad to get it.

After a moment's thought, Galeotto pointed to a large brooch with a pendent pearl the size of a quail's egg lying in the coffer held open before him by a page. Another pinned it to the Prince's hat, where its weight pulled the velvet into a pouch over one eye, in harmony with those beneath. The Prince straightened his shoulders and beamed round. He was ready for his bride.

His bride was certainly ready for him. The Lady Ariana had already entered the city, welcomed with her stepmother at the Prince's Gate by the chief citizens of Borgo, fifty men, solemn in identical gowns of purple and scarlet to which their Prince had treated them. A

forest of purple bonnets came off in a simultaneous gesture that had taken lengthy rehearsing. One elderly citizen muffed it and fumbled his bonnet to the ground, fixing a glazed limit to the bride's smile. There were the usual trumpets and Latin speeches which the grand folk were supposed to understand and the common folk took as a useful rest in which to stare at the Lady Ariana. They had been right about the hair; it was red, copious, and fluffed out to make it seem more plentiful — 'locky' was the fashionable mode — and they were gratified to find that she was, in spite of freckles that showed under rice powder, pretty. Duchess Violante was beautiful, but everybody knew that. Both ladies shimmered in cloth of silver and gold brocade and the crowd was deeply satisfied with the spectacle.

The Lady Ariana spoke briefly in Latin thanks and the Duchess spoke fluently. More trumpets, and the ladies and their train (got up in matching dresses of green satin) moved on, among loud cheers, at a dignified pace on their white palfreys towards the arch bearing the effigies of the bridal pair. Advancing towards them, with well-timed slowness, accompanied by a troop of courtiers in brown velvet and gold chains, came Prince Galeotto, straining his small eyes for the first sight of his bride. Could she live up to her picture, though he didn't?

Sigismondo and Benno had secured an excellent place on the route, firstly by early arrival and then because of Sigismondo's commanding build and presence. They stood right by the arch with the bridal figures, under which the real pair were to meet. Again there would be a fanfare, and a group of trumpeters either side of the arch was fidgeting in readiness. Their trumpets, bannered with the arms of Borgo worked in gold on scarlet, rested on their hips.