

The title "THE SECRET OF SANTA VITTORIA" is written in large, bold, red, serif capital letters. The text is surrounded by a collage of small, cut-out figures in various poses. Some figures are holding bottles, and others are in dynamic, athletic or acrobatic stances. The background is a textured, yellowish-green color.

THE SECRET OF SANTA VITTORIA



A NOVEL BY
Robert Crichton



BY ROBERT CRICHTON

The Secret of Santa Vittoria

The Rascal and the Road

The Great Impostor

The Secret

a novel by

ROBERT CRICHTON

of Santa Vittoria

SIMON AND SCHUSTER • NEW YORK

**The Santa Vittoria of this novel is a real place,
but none of the characters described or mentioned
in the novel are real, and any resemblance to living
persons is purely coincidental.**

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*For Judy, who for four years led
two lives and sometimes three lives, so that
I might write these lives.*

In the long run, one life means nothing.

CAPTAIN SEPP VON PRUM

In the end, nothing is more important than one life.

ITALO BOMBOLINI

**THE BEGINNING OF THE
BEGINNING**

THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT of this book was left outside the door of my hotel room in Montefalcone, in Italy, in May 1962. It arrived in the manner of the classic foundling. Wrapped in coarse brown paper and held together by cheap twine, the bundle literally fell into my life when I opened the door one morning. A note pinned to it read: "In the name of God, do something with this."

As with most foundlings, this one was a bastard. The note was not signed, the title page was missing, the manuscript had no professed father. It was not a manuscript at all, but a collection of disorganized notes. I let it lie in a corner of the room for several days, since I resented it as an intruder in my life, but as it also is with most foundlings this one cried out to live, and one night I

untied the twine and began to read the notes. They were written in a bad hand in English and Italian and in the dialect of this region, and sometime in the night I realized that it might prove to be my burden to raise another man's child.

What to label this book has been the subject of argument. The collector of the notes, whom I now know to be Roberto Abruzzi, calls it a history. One note, perhaps intended to be the title page, reads:

**THE SECRET OF SANTA VITTORIA
THE DIARY OF A TRUE EVENT**

Some important things have been found to be true. There is a town of Santa Vittoria, and the great central incident around which this story revolves, the secret, is history.

Some of the people named in the book are alive and still tend vines on the side of the mountain Santa Vittoria clings to. But others have never existed, including some who are pictured in a good light. Much is made about a green light that burns in the Piazza of the People in memory of the martyr Babbaluche, but there is no such flame. And just when one is tempted to doubt there ever was a cobbler named Babbaluche his name is found carved on a wall in the rock quarry where he is said to have given his life.

The difficulty in finding the truth lies with Santa Vittoria itself. The city, as they call it, is an Italian hill town, one of those clusters of houses which can be seen from any main highway, a huddle of gray and white shapes pressed up against the side of a mountain as if they were sheep fearful of falling off it, which they sometimes do. Some are unreachable except by mule or on foot or by military vehicles, and the towns are as isolated on their mountains as any island in the sea.

The people have no tradition of outsiders and no procedures for handling them. They are not hostile, but they are suspicious and afraid of them. History has proved that to talk to strangers sooner or later leads to trouble or ends up costing money, and so history has rendered them incapable of telling truths to outsiders. They don't lie, but they never of their own will provide the truth. There are people in Santa Vittoria who are capable of denying

knowledge of the town fountain when it can be heard bubbling behind their backs.

And if one hopes to reach the people, Italian is the wrong language to use. Italian is the language of Rome and, as such, the tongue for taxes and trouble and misunderstanding. For the native of a hill town, Italy is somewhere beyond him, and Milan can be less understood and more mysterious than America. The walls of his town and the fields around them are his Italy and the main piazza is his Rome. His loyalty is to himself and to his family, and if there is any left over it might extend to his street and even to his section of town. In times of crisis such as Santa Vittoria knew, when everyone's safety and money are at stake, loyalty might extend itself to take in the entire town. But beyond that there is nothing more. What is Sardinia to Santa Vittoria? Loyalty ends with the last grapevines at the foot of the mountain.

And Santa Vittoria is grapevines; it is wine. That is all there is. Without the wine, as they say here, even God Himself could not invent a reason for Santa Vittoria. My failure in Santa Vittoria is that I was seen thinning their fat black wine with mineral water, and by that one act I had adulterated the meaning of their lives and diluted the result of their sweat. They never even lied to me after that.

As for Roberto Abruzzi, I have never seen him, but I have talked with him. He would telephone me at my hotel and then ask me to call him back so as to save money, and we would talk for long periods of time. Abruzzi is an American who cannot go back to the United States, or thinks that he can't go back, because of something that he did. I am not certain that he is an American. It is possible that he is an Italian who feels that by posing as an American he might find a better market for his notes. The intricacies of the Italian mind, the strategies employed by the poor in hill towns to see themselves through just one day, are not known in this country. But when you read what he writes I think that, like myself, you will believe him.

In return for food and the use of a house he was asked by the people of Santa Vittoria to tell their story and record for them the great thing the people of that city did there in the summer and the fall of 1943. They asked Abruzzi to write the book because, as

an American, he was supposed to know how to do such things.

It wasn't easy for Roberto Abruzzi to begin. No one in Santa Vittoria had written a book and not too many people there had read one, but everyone knew how this book should be written.

"Put down anything, put down a lot. Long books are better than short ones," Vittorini, the old soldier and the most cultured man in Santa Vittoria, told him. "Say anything just so you say it beautifully."

The priest, Padre Polenta, handed him this note one morning:

Remember this, Roberto. One's words must glide across the page like a swan moving across the waters. One must be conscious of the movement without a thought of what is causing it to move.

It was enough to stop him for a month. His pen, as he told me, was like the ugly orange feet. The people had contracted for a swan and he was going to deliver a swine. But in the end Roberto wrote what he did because he had a stronger reason for doing it than to satisfy the vanity of Santa Vittoria. As he is willing to admit, he has been a thief about it. In order to tell his own story, which he feels is a shameful one but which he knew had to come out of him before it consumed him, he has stolen the far greater story of Santa Vittoria. Roberto Abruzzi was a deserter during the war, but it is his hope that if he can tell about it, some people might be able to understand him and he might some day be allowed to return to the United States, where he was born, and build a new life again. This is the price that he asks the reader to pay in return for the story of Santa Vittoria. It is not a high price to pay.

Here, then, is the foundling that I agreed to adopt. From that bastard, the ragged bundle of notes of Roberto Abruzzi, has grown this book.

Montefalcone, 1962
New York, 1965

1 THE BEGINNING

