

FORMAN JUSTUS MILES

THE ISLAND OF
ENCHANTMENT

Justus Forman

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Justus Miles Forman

The Island of Enchantment

I

Young Zuan Gradenigo

Evil tidings have their own trick of spreading abroad. You cannot bury them. The news which had come secretly to Venice was known from the Giudecca to Madonna dell'Orto in two hours. Before noon it was in Murano.

Young Zuan Gradenigo, making his way on foot from the crowded Merceria into the Piazza di San Marco, ran upon his friend, the young German captain, whom men called Il Lupo – his name was Wölfart – and learned, what almost every other man in the city already knew, how Lewis of Hungary, taking excuse of a merchant ship looted in Venetian waters, was on his way to a second invasion, and had given over the Dalmatian towns to the ban of Bosnia to ravage.

The two men were still eagerly discussing the matter and its probable outcome, half an hour later, standing beside one of the gayly painted booths which, at this time – the spring of 1355 – were clustered about the foot of the great Campanile, when a servant in the livery of the doge touched young Zuan's arm and, in a low tone, gave him a message.

Gradenigo turned back to the German.

"My uncle wishes to see me at once in the palace," he said. "If you are not pressed, go to my house and wait for me there. I may have important news for you." Then, with a parting wave of the hand, he went quickly across the Piazzetta and under the gateway to the right of St. Mark's.

At the head of the great stair two men were awaiting him, and they led him at once through a narrow passage with secret sliding-doors to an inner cabinet of the private apartments of the newly elected doge, his uncle, Giovanni Gradenigo.

The doge sat alone in a great carven chair before a table which was littered with papers and with maps and with writing-materials. From a high window at one side colored beams of light slanted down and rested in crimson and blue splashes upon the dark oak of the table and what lay there, and upon the rich velvet of the doge's robe, and upon his peculiar cap of office. He was not a very old man, but he was far from strong. Indeed, even at this time he was slowly wasting away with the disease which carried him off a year later, but as he sat there, bowed before the table, he looked old and very worn and tired. His face had no color at all. It was like a dead man's face – cold and damp.

And yet, although he was ill and seemed quite unfit for labors or duties of any sort, he was in reality an unusually keen and shrewd man, capable of unremitting toil. There burned somewhere within the shrunken, pallid body an astonishingly fierce flame of life. He had been elected to office hard upon the Faliero catastrophe partly because his name was one of the very greatest in Venice – two others of his house had worn the cap and ring within the century past – but chiefly because his sympathies were as remote as possible from the liberal views of the poor old man who had preceded him. He was patrician before all else, and fiercely tenacious of patrician rights – fiercely proud of his name and possessions.

He did not move as his nephew entered the room, only his pale eyes rose slowly to the young man's face and as slowly dropped again to the table before him. Young Zuan pulled forward one of the heavy, uncomfortable chairs of carved wood and sat down in it. He was wondering very busily what his uncle wanted of him, but he knew the old man too well to ask questions. Besides that, it would not have been respectful.

Presently the pale eyes rose again.

"You have – heard?" asked the doge, in his thin voice.

Young Zuan nodded.

"It is all over Venice," he said. "That Angevin devil Lewis is coming westward again, and, to begin with, has set his friend the ban on Zara and Spalato. He chose his time well, God knows!" He paused a moment as if in expectation of comment, but old Giovanni's face was a death-mask, immobile, and he went on: "As Il Lupo, the German captain, said to me a quarter of an hour ago, 'Venice is a very sick man – poison within, wounds without.' We shall lose Dalmatia."

Old Giovanni nodded once or twice, and for a moment he closed his pale eyes, sitting quite motionless in his great chair. It was as if he ceased even to breathe. Then, quite suddenly, the eyes snapped open and a swift flame of rage seemed to leap up in the old man, amazing in its unexpectedness. A momentary patch of crimson glowed upon each of the gray cheeks.

"That dog may have Dalmatia," he cried, "but, by God and by my ring of office! I'm damned if he shall have Arbe! I won't give up Arbe! I want to die there!"

Now Arbe needs a very brief word of comment. It was, and is, one of the northern Dalmatian islands – a tiny island, claw-fashioned, ten miles long, perhaps, not more than a mile wide at its thickest. It is hemmed about by greater isles – Veglia to the north, Cherso and Lussin Grande to the west, Pago to the south. Eastward the high, bare, rocky rampart of the Croatian hills rises sheer from the sea, almost throwing its shadow over the island that nestles under it. The northern expanse of Arbe is wooded, but at the extremity of one south-stretching claw sits a city in miniature.

It was at this time, and had been for more than a century, a summer resort for several of the great Venetian families, who had built there villas and campanili and churches as beautiful as anything beside the Grand Canal, though no more beautiful than those of the true, native, Arbesan families, such as the De Dominis and Nemira and Zudeneghi. As a witness that I do not lie, you may see the ruins of them even now – magnificent ruins, dwelt in by a horde of fishermen. And among these great families, by far the foremost had been the Gradenigo. There were three Gradenigo villas, cloistered and courtyarded, which were magnificent enough to be called palaces; a Gradenigo had, early in the thirteenth century, built the highest and finest of the four campanili – it still stands; a Gradenigo had been several times count of the island. Hence, as you see, Arbe was peculiarly a Gradenigo pride. It was the apple of their eye. Hence also you will comprehend old Giovanni's sudden flare of rage. His withered heart was wrung with fear. He saw, I have no doubt, hideous visions of the ban's barbarians slaying, looting, wielding torch and hammer in his fairy-land.

Young Zuan looked up with new concern.

"A-ah!" he said, half under his breath. "Arbe! – I had not thought of Arbe." His tone took on a shade of doubt.

"Is it likely," he wondered, aloud, "that the ban will go out of his way to attack the island? It's of no value whatever, strategically. It would be mere wanton vandalism."

"And what," snarled old Giovanni, "is that mongrel Bosnian but a vandal? 'Likely,' say you? It is more than that. The dog has sworn to take Arbe and give it to that Magyar strumpet of his, Yaga. He knows nothing would hurt me more. He went about Zara, a week ago, boasting openly of what he meant to do – so the word comes."

Young Zuan flushed red and cursed under his breath.

"That is beyond bearing!" he said. "That woman in Arbe? That shameless, thieving wanton who stole away Natalia Volutich?"

The doge nodded, licking his blue lips. "The same," he said. "The ban's Yaga would appear to have a grudge against the house of Gradenigo."

About a year before this time, for the sake of cementing a closer union between the two republics, a marriage had been arranged between young Zuan Gradenigo and the daughter of the Ragusan Senator Volutich. But before Zuan had reached Ragusa to make his visit of ceremony and see his prospective bride, the girl, riding with her women a little way beyond the land gate of the

town, had been stolen by brigands. Such things were by no means extraordinary. Nothing had been heard of her since, save that, a fortnight after her capture, a letter, couched in most insulting terms, had come to Ragusa from the Princess Yaga, that infamous favorite of the ban, saying that the girl was in her household and somewhat preferred it to her former home.

"It's beyond bearing!" said young Zuan again, and he was so angry that his voice shook. Then, after the two had for a moment stared into each other's eyes, he threw out his hands with a little laugh of sheer exasperation.

"But what can we do?" he cried. "Madonna Santissima, what can we do? With this war upon our hands the council will never consent to sending aid to Arbe, which is, after all, of importance to only a few families."

"They *must* consent!" said the doge, fiercely. "I will not lose Arbe! Look you! Who are the families concerned? Loredan, Morosini, Dandolo, Celsi, Venier, Contarini, Corner. All of them members of the Ten. I will see them, and, among us, we shall be able to arrange it. The thing must remain a private matter. We who love Arbe must go to Arbe's aid unofficially. Three galleys will suffice. They must leave to-night, and the council must not know of it until after they have sailed."

Young Zuan looked up with a certain awe, for the scheme, when one considered the state of internal affairs in Venice at that time, was almost madness.

"It is a desperate plan," he said, gravely. "You must feel very deeply to risk such a scheme, after the Faliero affair."

Old Giovanni Gradenigo beat his yellow hand upon the table before him, and once again the two spots of color came out upon his sunken cheeks.

"I will not lose Arbe!" he cried for the third time. "Leave the risk and the arrangements to me. As for you, Zuan, you must go at the head of the expedition. I want a Gradenigo to rescue my island, and you are the only one of the house who is experienced in warfare."

"Oh yes, of course I should go," said Zuan. "I have the best right." He rose to take his leave. "I shall have a busy day of it," he said, "but I can have the three galleys ready before midnight, and secretly at that. I shall take Il Lupo with me. He is very faithful and a better man than I. When shall I come to you for instructions and authority? I must have authority to clear the galleys, of course."

"Come to-night when I send for you," said the doge. "Everything shall be ready for you." He had sunk wearily back in his great chair once more, and all signs of life had faded from his face. It seemed to his nephew that he looked more than ever like a dead man. He raised one feeble hand a little way as if in sign of dismissal, but the hand dropped back upon the carved wood of the chair-arm with a sort of dry rattle, and Zuan left him so, still, silent, deathly, with the bars of colored light from the high window slanting across his velvet robes in billets and lozenges of vert and gules and azure.

The three galleys which slipped gently out of the canal of the Giudecca that night bore southward before a favoring maestrale. Of one galley young Zuan Gradenigo held the command, of another the German called Il Lupo, and of the third a Venetian captain whose name does not matter. By noon of the next day they were off Lussin Grande, and hove to, well out of sight of land, to await the darkness. They saw during the day nothing to disturb them. No ship passed save a Venetian fishing-boat or two, high-prowed and with colored triangular sails painted with some device; also, in the afternoon, three great trabacoli south bound from Trieste or Pola, bluff-bowed craft, with hawse-ports painted to represent ferocious eyes.

Towards evening the maestrale died away, as it so often does in these waters, and from the south a sirocco arose, bringing a rack of clouds over the sky and a heavy dampness to the air. Before dark it was freshening fast and a fine rain was beginning to drive. The three galleys pitched and plunged heavily in the mounting sea. Young Gradenigo signalled to the two other ships, and, leading the way himself, ran for the southern point of Lussin. He knew that, once within the shelter of the islands and scoglie, he would be well out of danger, for there is never a sea there, even though a storm may be raging outside.

By the time he reached the tranquil shelter between Lussin and Pago the night had fallen, black dark. It rained in spells, but once in a while the driving rack overhead parted for a moment and a flash of moonlight came down. Young Zuan ordered the galley brought to, and waited for one of these momentary floods of light. The light came, touching with silver the great, tumbling seas outside the barrier reef, but the seas were empty. There were no galleys making for the southern point of Lussin. Gradenigo turned with an oath of surprise to the old sailing-master who stood beside him, sheltering his eyes from the wind with one brown hand.

"They have been driven northward," he said. "They'll have to run between Cherso and the mainland and beat south again by Veglia." The sailing-master shook his head gloomily.

"It is a bad night, lord," said he. "That sea will be hell in another hour." And he moved off forward to give orders to his men.

There seemed nothing for it but to go on, and, in the sheltered cove at the north of Arbe, where the disembarkment was to take pace, await the other ships. Young Zuan felt no great anxiety over them; he was sure that they had merely been driven northward, and would have to round Cherso, and then make their way down again through the sheltered "canal" between that island and Veglia. His only fear was that they might not reach Arbe before morning, in which case the relief of the city – granting always that the ban's expedition had already occupied it – would have to be delayed until another night.

He put about again, and, running before the strong sirocco (the wind, of course, reaches these sheltered waters, somewhat abated, though there is no sea), made out the lights of Arbe within two hours. In another hour, leaving the galley well to the west of the island and hidden in the gloom, he was in a skiff, rowed by two strong sailor-men, creeping round the walls of the city.

Now it has been said that the city occupies a southward-jutting claw of rock. The villas and streets, indeed, crowd to the very edge of the narrow ridge. On the western side the sea-wall, a hundred feet high, rises sheer from the water, and is continued upward by the walls of the buildings. Eastward, however, round the point, the land slopes lower, and here is a sheltered cove in the crook of the rocky claw, with a mole and landing-place of hewn stone. Upon the landing-place opens a public square.

Young Zuan in his skiff crept round the point, and, always under the shelter of the sea-wall, into the still harbor where was the landing-place. Fifty yards from the point where the sea-wall dropped to the water's level and the open square began, he halted. From the wall near by lion heads of carved stone projected, and in each beast's mouth hung a great bronze ring for mooring ships. One of the two sailor-men laid hold of a ring and held the skiff steady, and Zuan rose to his feet to look.

Far over his head the wind – driving a thin rain before it once more – shrieked and whistled past the roofs of Arbe, and flapped the gay awnings which hung over the marble balconies. Once, above the wind's noise, a woman's shriek rose and held and then died suddenly. Beyond, in the open square, a great fire blazed on the flags, and hurrying men in strange dress threw armfuls of fuel upon it. Others held hands and danced about the fire in a ring, like devils, singing a weird and wild chant. It was a fine chant and stirring, and these Huns sang it well, but to young Zuan Gradenigo's ears it was the baying of unclean dogs.

He dropped back upon the thwart of his skiff with a sobbing curse. The ban's Magyar strumpet was set where the ban had sworn to set her.

"Row to the galley!" he said, and as the two sailor-men bent to their work, standing at their oars gondolier fashion, and the skiff leaped forward through the wet gloom, he laid his face in his hands and it twisted and worked bitterly. He was by no means a coward, and he was not a particularly imaginative man, but the picture of that leaping fire and the leaping, chanting devils about it persisted before his eyes, and he looked forward to the struggle which was to come, and an odd premonition of disaster took possession of him and would not be driven away.

In the tiny sheltered cove of rendezvous, two miles above the city, they anchored the galley and disembarked. There is a rocky headland beside the cove, high at its outer end, and here certain

trusty officers took their station, with lanterns muffled in their cloaks, to watch for the approach of the other two ships. Young Zuan went within a deserted fisherman's hut which stood where wood and beach met, and there held council with his sailing-master and his chief lieutenant. He was still strong in the belief that Il Lupo's ship and the other were safe and would arrive in a few hours – it was by now somewhat after midnight – but the old sailing-master again shook a gloomy head. He had served Venice for forty years on land and sea, and he was a pessimist.

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