

Boothby Guy

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CHAPTER I

We were in Venice; Venice the silent and mysterious; the one European city of which I never tire. My wife had not enjoyed good health for some months past, and for this reason we had been wintering in Southern Italy. After that we had come slowly north, spending a month in Florence, and a fortnight in Rome *en route*, until we found ourselves in Venice, occupying a suite of apartments at Galaghetti's famous hotel overlooking the Grand Canal. Our party was a small one; it consisted of my wife, her friend, Gertrude Trevor, and myself, Richard Hatteras, once of the South Sea Islands, but now of the New Forest, Hampshire, England. It may account for our fondness of Venice when I say that four years previous we had spent the greater part of our honeymoon there. Whatever the cause may have been, however, there could be no sort of doubt that the grand old city, with its palaces and churches, its associations stretching back to long-forgotten centuries, and its silent waterways, possessed a great fascination for us. We were never tired of exploring it, finding something to interest us in even the most out-of-the-way corners. In Miss Trevor we possessed a charming companion, a vital necessity, as you will admit, when people travel together. She was an uncommon girl in more ways than one; a girl, so it seems to me, England alone is able to produce. She could not be described as a pretty girl, but then the word "pretty" is one that sometimes comes perilously near carrying contempt with it; one does not speak of Venus de Medici as pretty, nor would one describe the Apollo Belvedere as very nice-looking. That Miss Trevor was exceedingly handsome would, I fancy, be generally admitted. At any rate she would command attention wherever she might go, and that is an advantage which few of us possess. Should a more detailed description of her be necessary, I might add that she was tall and dark, with black hair and large luminous eyes that haunted one, and were suggestive of a southern ancestor. She was the daughter, and indeed the only child, of the well-known Dean of Bedminster, and this was the first time she had visited Italy, or that she had been abroad. The wonders of the Art Country were all new to her, and in consequence our wanderings were one long succession of delight. Every day added some new pleasure to her experiences, while each night saw a life desire gratified.

In my humble opinion, to understand Italy properly one should not presume to visit her until after the first blush of youth has departed, and then only when one has prepared oneself to properly appreciate her many beauties. Venice, above all others, is a city that must be taken seriously. To come at a proper spirit of the place one must be in a reverent mood. Cheap jokes and Cockney laughter are as unsuited to the place, where Falieri yielded his life, as a downcast face would be in Nice at carnival time. On the afternoon of the particular day from which I date my story, we had been to the island of Murano to pay a visit to the famous glass factories of which it is the home. By the time we reached Venice once more it was nearly sunset. Having something like an hour to spare we made our way, at my wife's suggestion, to the Florian *café* on the piazza of Saint Mark in order to watch the people. As usual the place was crowded, and at first glance it looked as if we should be unable to find sufficient vacant chairs. Fortune favoured us, however, and when we had seated ourselves and I had ordered coffee, we gave ourselves up to the enjoyment of what is perhaps one of the most amusing scenes in Venice. To a thoughtful mind the Great Square must at all times be an object of absorbing interest. I have seen it at every hour, and under almost every aspect: at break of day, when one has it to oneself and is able to enjoy its beauty undisturbed; at midday, when the importunate shop-keepers endeavour to seduce one into entering their doors (by tales of the marvels therein); at sunset, when the *cafés* are crowded, the band plays, and all is merriment; and last, but not least, at midnight, when

the moon is sailing above Saint Mark's, the square is full of strange shadows, and the only sound to be heard is the cry of a gull on the lagoon, or the "*Sa Premi*" of some belated gondolier.

"This is the moment to which I have looked forward all my life," said Miss Trevor, as she sat back in her chair and watched the animated crowd before her. "Look at that pretty little boy with the pigeons flocking round him. What a picture he would make if one only had a camera."

"If you care to have a photo of him one can easily be obtained," I remarked. "Any one of these enterprising photographers would be only too pleased to take one for you for a few centissimi. I regret to say that many of our countrymen have a weakness for being taken in that way."

"Fancy Septimus Brown, of Tooting," my wife remarked, "a typical English paterfamilias, with a green veil, blue spectacles, and white umbrella, daring to ask the sun to record his image with the pigeons of St. Mark's clustering about his venerable head. Can't you picture the pride of that worthy gentleman's family when they produce the album on Sunday afternoons and show it to their friends? 'This is pa,' the eldest girl will probably remark, 'when he was travelling in Venice' (as if Venice were a country in which one must be perpetually moving on), 'and that's how the pigeons came down to him to be fed. Isn't it splendid of him?' Papa, who has never ventured beyond Brighton beach before, will be a person of importance from that moment."

"You forget one circumstance, however," Miss Trevor replied, who enjoyed an argument, and for this reason contradicted my wife on principle, "that in allowing himself to be taken at all, Brown of Tooting has advanced a step. For the moment he dared to throw off his insularity, as the picture at which you are laughing is indisputable testimony. Do you think he would dare to be photographed in a similar fashion in his own market-place, standing outside his shop-door with his assistants watching him from behind the counter? I am quite sure he would not!"

"A very excellent argument," I answered. "Unfortunately, however, it carries with it its own refutation. The mere fact that Brown takes the photograph home to show to his friends goes a long way towards proving that he is still as insular as when he set out. If he did not consider himself of sufficient importance to shut out a portion of Saint Mark's with his voluminous personality, he would not have employed the photographer at all, in which case we are no further advanced than before."

These little sparring-matches were a source of great amusement to us. The Cockney tourist was Miss Trevor's *bête noir*. And upon this failing my wife and I loved to twit her. On the whole I rather fancy she liked being teased by us.

We had finished our coffee and were still idly watching the people about us when I noticed that my wife had turned a little pale. I was about to remark upon it, when she uttered an exclamation as if something had startled her.

"Good gracious! Dick," she cried, "surely it is not possible. It must be a mistake."

"What is it cannot be possible?" I inquired. "What do you think you see?"

I glanced in the direction she indicated, but could recognize no one with whom I was acquainted. An English clergyman and his daughter were sitting near the entrance to the *café*, and some officers in uniform were on the other side of them again, but still my wife was looking in the same direction and with an equally startled face. I placed my hand upon her arm. It was a long time since I had seen her so agitated.

"Come, darling," I said, "tell me what it is that troubles you."

"Look," she answered, "can you see the table a little to the right of that at which those officers are seated?"

I was about to reply in the affirmative, but the shock I received deprived me of speech. The person to whom my wife referred had risen from his chair, and was in the act of walking towards us. I looked at him, looked away, and then looked again. No! there was no room for doubt; the likeness was unmistakable. I should have known him anywhere. *He was Doctor Nikola*; the man who had played such an important part in our life's drama. Five years had elapsed since I had last seen him, but in that time he was scarcely changed at all. It was the same tall, thin figure; the same sallowness, clean-shaven

face; the same piercing black eyes. As he drew nearer I noticed that his hair was a little more grey, that he looked slightly older; otherwise he was unchanged. But why was he coming to us? Surely he did not mean to speak to us? After the manner in which he had treated us in by-gone days I scarcely knew how to receive him. He on his side, however, was quite self-possessed. Raising his hat with that easy grace that always distinguished him, he advanced and held out his hand to my wife.

"My dear Lady Hatteras," he began in his most conciliatory tone, "I felt sure you would recognize me. Observing that you had not forgotten me, I took the liberty of coming to pay my respects to you."

Then before my wife could reply he had turned to me and was holding out his hand. For a moment I had half determined not to take it, but when his glittering eyes looked into mine I changed my mind and shook hands with him more cordially than I should ever have thought it possible for me to do. Having thus broken the ice, and as we had to all intents and purposes permitted him to derive the impression that we were prepared to forgive the Past, nothing remained for us but to introduce him to Miss Trevor. From the moment that he had approached us she had been watching him covertly, and that he had produced a decided impression upon her was easily seen. For the first time since we had known her she, usually so staid and unimpressible, was nervous and ill at ease. The introduction effected she drew back a little, and pretended to be absorbed in watching a party of our fellow-countrymen who had taken their places at a table a short distance from us. For my part I do not mind confessing that I was by no means comfortable. I remembered my bitter hatred of Nikola in days gone by. I recalled that terrible house in Port Said, and thought of the night on the island when I had rescued my wife from his clutches. In my estimation then he had been a villain of the deepest dye, and yet here he was sitting beside me as calm and collected, and apparently as interested in the *résumé* of our travels in Italy that my wife was giving him, as if we had been bosom friends throughout our lives. In any one else it would have been a piece of marvellous effrontery; in Nikola's case, however, it did not strike one in the same light. As I have so often remarked, he seemed incapable of acting like any other human being. His extraordinary personality lent a glamour to his simplest actions, and demanded for them an attention they would scarcely have received had he been less endowed.

"Have you been long in Venice?" my wife inquired when she had completed the record of our doings, feeling that she must say something.

"I seldom remain anywhere for very long," he answered, with one of his curious smiles. "I come and go like a Will-o'-the-wisp; I am here to-day and gone to-morrow."

It may have been an unfortunate remark, but I could not help uttering it.

"For instance, you are in London to-day," I said, "in Port Said next week, and in the South Sea Islands a couple of months later."

He was not in the least disconcerted.

"Ah! I see you have not forgotten our South Sea adventure," he replied cheerfully. "How long ago it seems, does it not? To me it is like a chapter out of another life." Then, turning to Miss Trevor, who of course had heard the story of our dealings with him sufficiently often to be weary of it, he added, "I hope you are not altogether disposed to think ill of me. Perhaps some day you will be able to persuade Lady Hatteras to forgive me, that is to say if she has not already done so. Yet I do not know why I should plead for pardon, seeing that I am far from being in a repentant mood. As a matter of fact I am very much afraid that, should the necessity arise, I should be compelled to act as I did then."

"Then let us pray most fervently that the necessity may never arise," I answered. "I for one do not entertain a very pleasant recollection of that time."

I spoke so seriously that my wife looked sharply up at me. Fearing, I suppose, that I might commit myself, she added quickly —

"I trust it may not. For I can assure you, Doctor Nikola, that my inclinations lie much nearer Bond Street than the South Sea Islands."

All this time Miss Trevor said nothing, but I could tell from the expression upon her face that Nikola interested her more than she would have been willing to admit.

"Is it permissible to ask where you are staying?" he inquired, breaking the silence and speaking as if it were a point upon which he was most anxious to be assured.

"At Galaghetti's," I answered. "While in Venice we always make it our home."

"Ah! the good Galaghetti," said Nikola softly. "It is a long time since I last had the pleasure of seeing him. I fancy, however, he would remember me. I was able to do him a slight service some time ago, and I have always understood that he possesses a retentive memory."

Then, doubtless feeling that he had stayed long enough, he rose and prepared to take leave of us.

"Perhaps, Lady Hatteras, you will permit me to do myself the honour of calling upon you?" he said.

"We shall be very pleased to see you," my wife replied, though with no real cordiality.

He then bowed to Miss Trevor, and shook hands with myself.

"Good-bye, Hatteras," he continued. "I shall hope soon to see you again. I expect we have lots of news for each other, and doubtless you will be interested to learn the history and subsequent adventures of that peculiar little stick which caused you so much anxiety, and myself so much trouble, five years ago. My address is the Palace Revecce, in the Rio del Consiglio, where, needless to say, I shall be delighted to see you if you care to pay me a visit."

I thanked him for his invitation, and promised that I would call upon him.

Then with a bow he took his departure, leaving behind him a sensation of something missing, something that could not be replaced. To sit down and continue the conversation where he had broken into it was out of the question. We accordingly rose, and after I had discharged the bill, strolled across the piazza towards the lagoon. Observing that Miss Trevor was still very silent, I inquired the cause.

"If you really want me to tell you, I can only account for it by saying that your friend, Doctor Nikola, has occasioned it," she answered. "I don't know why it should be so, but that man has made a curious impression upon me."

"He seems to affect every one in a different manner," I said, and for some reason made no further comment upon her speech.

When we had called a gondola, and were on our way back to our hotel, she referred to the subject again.

"I think I ought to tell you that it is not the first time I have seen Doctor Nikola," she said. "You may remember that yesterday, while Phyllis was lying down, I went out to do some shopping. I cannot describe exactly which direction I took, save that I went towards the Rialto. It is sufficient that in the end I reached a chemist's shop. It was only a small place, and very dark, so dark indeed that I did not see that it contained another customer until I was really inside. Then I noticed a tall man busily engaged in conversation with the shopman. He was declaiming against some drugs he had purchased there on the previous day, and demanding that for the future they should be of better quality, otherwise he would be compelled to take his patronage elsewhere. In the middle of this harangue he turned round, and I was permitted an opportunity of seeing his face. He was none other than your friend, Doctor Nikola."

"But, my dear Gertrude," said Phyllis, "with all due respect to your narrative, I do not see that the mere fact of your having met Doctor Nikola in a chemist's shop yesterday, and your having been introduced to him to-day, should have caused you so much concern."

"I do not know why it should," she answered, "but it is a fact, nevertheless. Ever since I saw him yesterday, his face, with its terrible eyes, has haunted me. I dreamt of it last night. All day long I have had it before me, and now, as if to add to the strangeness of the coincidence, he proves to be the man of whom you have so often told me – your demoniacal, fascinating Nikola. You must admit that it is very strange."

"A coincidence, a mere coincidence, that is all," I replied. "Nikola possesses an extraordinary face, and it must have impressed itself more deeply upon you than the average countenance is happy enough to do."

Whether my explanation satisfied her or not, she said no more upon the subject. But that our strange meeting with Nikola had had an extraordinary effect upon her was plainly observable. As a rule she was as bright and merry a companion as one could wish to have; on this particular evening, however, she was not herself at all. It was the more annoying for the reason that I was anxious that she should shine on this occasion, as I was expecting an old friend, who was going to spend a few days with us in Venice. That friend was none other than the Duke of Glenbarth, who previous to his succession to the Dukedom had been known as the Marquis of Beckenham, and who, as the readers of the history of my adventures with Doctor Nikola may remember, figured as a very important factor in that strange affair. Ever since the day when I had the good fortune to render him a signal service in the bay of a certain south-coast watering-place, and from the time that he had accepted my invitation to join us in Venice, I had looked forward to his coming with the greatest possible eagerness. As it happened it was well-nigh seven o'clock by the time we reached our hotel. Without pausing in the hall further than to examine the letter-rack, we ascended to our rooms on the floor above. My wife and Miss Trevor had gone to their apartments, and I was about to follow their example as soon as I had obtained something from the sitting-room.

"A nice sort of host, a very nice host," said a laughing voice as I entered. "He invites me to stay with him, and is not at home to bid me welcome. My dear old Dick, how are you?"

"My dear fellow," I cried, hastening forward to greet him, "I must beg your pardon ten thousand times. I had not the least idea that you would be here so early. We have been sitting on the piazza, and did not hurry home."

"You needn't apologize," he answered. "For once an Italian train was before its time. And now tell me about yourself. How is your wife, how are you, and what sort of holiday are you having?"

I answered his questions to the best of my ability, keeping back my most important item as a surprise for him.

"And now," I said, "it is time to dress for dinner. But before you do so, I have some important news for you. Who do you think is in Venice?"

Needless to say he mentioned every one but the right person.

"You had better give it up, you will never guess," I said. "Who is the most unlikely person you would expect to see in Venice at the present moment?"

"Old Macpherson, my solicitor," he replied promptly. "The rascal would no more think of crossing the Channel than he would contemplate standing on his head in the middle of the Strand. It must be Macpherson."

"Nonsense," I cried. "I don't know Macpherson in the first place, and I doubt if he would interest me in the second. No! no! this man is neither a Scotchman nor a lawyer. He is an individual bearing the name of Nikola."

I had quite expected to surprise him, but I scarcely looked for such an outbreak of astonishment.

"What?" he cried, in amazement. "You must be joking. You don't mean to say that you have seen Nikola again?"

"I not only mean that I have seen him," I replied, "but I will go further than that, and say that he was sitting on the piazza with us not more than half-an-hour ago. What do you think his appearance in Venice means?"

"I don't know what to think," he replied, with an expression of almost comic bewilderment upon his face. "It seems impossible, and yet you don't look as if you were joking."

"I tell you the news in all sober earnestness," I answered, dropping my bantering tone. "It is a fact that Nikola is in Venice, and, what is more, that he has given me his address. He has invited me to call upon him, and if you like we will go together. What do you say?"

"I shall have to take time to think about it," Glenbarth replied seriously. "I don't suppose for a moment he has any intention of abducting me again; nevertheless, I am not going to give him the opportunity. By Jove, how that fellow's face comes back to me. It haunts me!"

"Miss Trevor has been complaining of the same thing," I said.

"Miss Trevor?" the Duke repeated. "And pray who may Miss Trevor be?"

"A friend of my wife's," I answered. "She has been travelling with us for the last few months. I think you will like her. And now come along with me and I'll show you your room. I suppose your man has discovered it by this time?"

"Stevens would find it if this hotel were constructed on the same principle as the maze at Hampton Court," he answered. "He has the virtue of persistence, and when he wants to find a thing he secures the person who would be the most likely to tell him, and sticks to him until his desire has been gratified."

It turned out as he had predicted, and three-quarters of an hour later our quartet sat down to dinner. My wife and Glenbarth, by virtue of an old friendship, agreed remarkably well, while Miss Trevor, now somewhat recovered from her Nikola indisposition, was more like her old self. It was a beautiful night, and after dinner it was proposed, seconded, and carried unanimously, that we should charter a gondola and go for a row upon the canal. On our homeward voyage the gondolier, by some strange chance, turned into the Rio del Consiglio.

"Perhaps you can tell me which is the Palace Revecce?" I said to the man.

He pointed to a building we were in the act of approaching.

"There it is, signor," he said. "At one time it was a very great palace but now – " here he shrugged his shoulders to enable us to understand that its glory had departed from it. Not another word was said upon the subject, but I noticed that all our faces turned in the direction of the building. With the exception of one solitary window it was in total darkness. As I looked at the latter I wondered whether Nikola were in the room, and if so, what he was doing? Was he poring over some of his curious books, trying some new experiment in chemistry, or putting to the test some theory such as I had found him at work upon in that curious house in Port Said? A few minutes later we had left the Rio del Consiglio behind us, had turned to the right, and were making our way back by another watery thoroughfare towards the Grand Canal.

"Thanks to your proposition we have had a delightful evening," Miss Trevor said, as we paused to say good-night at the foot of the staircase a quarter of an hour or so later. "I have enjoyed myself immensely."

"You should not tell him that, dear," said my wife. "You know how conceited he is already. He will take all the credit, and be unbearable for days afterwards." Then turning to me, she added, "You are going to smoke, I suppose?"

"I had thought of doing so," I replied; and then added with mock humility, "If you do not wish it of course I will not do so. I was only going to keep Glenbarth company."

They laughed and bade us good-night, and when we had seen them depart in the direction of their rooms we lit our cigars and passed into the balcony outside.

At this hour of the night the Grand Canal looked very still and beautiful, and we both felt in the humour for confidences.

"Do you know, Hatteras," said Glenbarth, after the few moments' pause that followed our arrival in the open air, "that Nikola's turning up in Venice at this particular juncture savours to me a little of the uncanny. What his mission may be, of course I cannot tell, but that it is some diabolical thing or another I haven't a doubt."

"One thing is quite certain," I answered, "he would hardly be here without an object, and, after our dealings with him in the past, I am prepared to admit that I don't trust him any more than you do."

"And now that he has asked you to call upon him what are you going to do?"

I paused before I replied. The question involved greater responsibilities than were at first glance apparent. Knowing Nikola so well, I had not the least desire or intention to be drawn into any of the plots or machinations he was so fond of working against other people. I must confess, nevertheless, that I could not help feeling a large amount of curiosity as to the subsequent history of that little stick, to obtain which he had spent so much money, and had risked so many lives.

"Yes, I think I shall call upon him," I said reflectively, as if I had not quite made up my mind. "Surely to see him once more could do no harm? Good heavens! what an extraordinary fellow he is! Fancy you or I being afraid of any other man as we are afraid of him, for mind you, I know that you stand quite as much in awe of him as I do. Why, do you know when my eyes fell upon him this afternoon I felt a return of the old dread his presence used to cause in me five years ago! The effect he had upon Miss Trevor was also very singular, when you come to think of it."

"By the way, Hatteras, talking of Miss Trevor, what an awfully nice girl she is. I don't know when I have ever met a nicer. Who is she?"

"She is the daughter of the Dean of Bedminster," I answered; "a splendid old fellow."

"I like his daughter," the Duke remarked. "Yes, I must say that I like her very much."

I was glad to hear this, for I had my own little dreams, and my wife, who, by the way, is a born matchmaker, had long ago come to a similar conclusion.

"She is a very nice girl," I replied, "and what is more, she is as good as she is nice." Then I continued, "He will be indeed a lucky man who wins Gertrude Trevor for his wife. And now, since our cigars are finished, what do you say to bed? It is growing late, and I expect you are tired after your journey."

"I am quite ready," he answered. "I shall sleep like a top. I only hope and pray that I shall not dream of Nikola."

CHAPTER II

Whether it was our excursion upon the canal that was responsible for it I cannot say; the fact, however, remains, that next morning every member of our party was late for breakfast. My wife and I were the first to put in an appearance, Glenbarth followed shortly after, and Miss Trevor was last of all. It struck me that the girl looked a little pale as she approached the window to bid me good-morning, and as she prided herself upon her punctuality, I jestingly reproved her for her late rising.

"I am afraid your gondola excursion proved too much for you," I said, in a bantering tone, "or perhaps you dreamt of Doctor Nikola."

I expected her to declare in her usual vehement fashion that she would not waste her time dreaming of any man, but to my combined astonishment and horror her eyes filled with tears, until she was compelled to turn her head away in order to hide them from me. It was all so unexpected that I did not know what to think. As may be supposed, I had not the slightest intention of giving her pain, nor could I quite see how I managed to do so. It was plain, however, that my thoughtless speech had been the means of upsetting her, and I was heartily sorry for my indiscretion. Fortunately my wife had not overheard what had passed between us.

"Is he teasing you again, Gertrude?" she said, as she slipped her arm through her friend's. "Take my advice and have nothing to do with him. Treat him with contempt. Besides, the coffee is getting cold, and that is a very much more important matter. Let us sit down to breakfast."

Nothing could have been more opportune. We took our places at the table, and by the time the servant had handed the first dishes Miss Trevor had recovered herself sufficiently to be able to look me in the face, and to join in the conversation without the likelihood of a catastrophe. Still there could be no doubt that she was far from being in a happy frame of mind. I said as much to my wife afterwards, when we were alone together.

"She told me she had had a very bad night," the little woman replied. "Our meeting with Doctor Nikola yesterday on the piazza upset her for some reason or another. She said that she had dreamt of nothing else. As you know she is very highly strung, and when you think of the descriptions we have given her of him, it is scarcely to be wondered at that she should attach an exaggerated importance to our unexpected meeting with him. That is the real explanation of the mystery. One thing, however, is quite certain; in her present state of mind she must see no more of him than can be helped. It might upset her altogether. Oh, why did he come here to spoil our holiday?"

"I cannot see that he has spoilt it, my dear," I returned, putting my arm round her waist and leading her to the window. "The girl will very soon recover from her fit of depression, and afterwards will be as merry as a marriage-bell. By the way, I don't know why I should think of it just now, but talking of marriage-bells reminds me that Glenbarth told me last night that he thought Gertrude one of the nicest girls he had ever met."

"I am delighted to hear it," my wife answered. "And still more delighted to think that he has such good sense. Do you know, I have set my heart upon that coming to something. No! you needn't shake your head. For very many reasons it would be a most desirable match."

"For my own part I believe it was for no other reason that you bothered me into inviting him to join our party here. You are a matchmaker. I challenge you to refute the accusation."

"I shall not attempt to do so," she retorted with considerable hauteur. "It is always a waste of time to argue with you. At any rate you must agree with me that Gertrude would make an ideal duchess."

"So you have travelled as far as that, have you?" I inquired. "I must say that you jump to conclusions very quickly. Because Glenbarth happens to have said in confidence to me (a confidence I am willing to admit I have shamefully abused) that he considers Gertrude Trevor a very charming girl, it does not follow that he has the very slightest intention of asking her to be his wife. Why should he?"

"If he doesn't he is not fit to sit in the House of Lords," she answered, as if that ought to clinch the argument. "Fancy a man posing as one of our hereditary legislators who doesn't know how to seize such a golden opportunity. As a good churchwoman I pray for the nobility every Sunday morning; and if not knowing where to look for the best wife in the world may be taken as a weakness, and it undoubtedly is, then all I can say is, that they require all the praying for they can get!"

"But I should like to know, how is he going to marry the best wife in the world?" I asked.

"By asking her," she retorted. "He doesn't surely suppose she is going to ask him?"

"If he values his life he'd better not do that!" I said savagely. "He will have to answer for it to me if he does!"

"Ah," she answered, her lips curling, "I thought as much. You are jealous of him. You don't want him to ask her because you fancy that if he does your reign will be over. A nice admission for a married man, I must say!"

"I presume you mean because I refuse to allow him to flirt with my wife?"

"I mean nothing of the kind, and you know it. How dare you say, Dick, that I flirt with the Duke?"

"Because you have confessed it," I answered with a grin of triumph, for I had got her cornered at last. "Did you not say, only a moment ago, that if he did not know where to find the best wife in the world he was unfit to sit in the House of Lords? Did you not say that he ought to be ashamed of himself if he did not ask her to be his wife? Answer that, my lady."

"I admit that I did say it; but you know very well that I referred to Gertrude Trevor!"

"Gertrude Trevor is not yet a wife. The best wife in the world is beside me now; and since you are already proved to be in the wrong you must perforce pay the penalty."

She was in the act of doing so when Gertrude entered the room.

"Oh, dear," she began, hesitating in pretended consternation, "is there never to be an end of it?"

"An end of what?" demanded my wife with some little asperity, for she does not like her little endearments to be witnessed by other people.

"Of this billing and cooing," the other replied. "You two insane creatures have been married more than four years, and yet a third person can never enter the room without finding you love-making. I declare it upsets all one's theories of marriage. One of my most cherished ideas was that this sort of thing ceased with the honeymoon, and that the couple invariably lead a cat-and-dog life for the remainder of their existence."

"So they do," my wife answered unblushingly. "And what can you expect when one is a great silly creature who will not learn to jump away and be looking innocently out of the window when he hears the handle turned? Never marry, Gertrude. Mark my words: you will repent it if you do!"

"Well, for ingratitude and cool impudence, that surpasses everything!" I said in astonishment. "Why, you audacious creature, not more than five minutes ago you were inviting me to co-operate in the noble task of finding a husband for Miss Trevor!"

"Richard, how can you stand there and say such things?" she ejaculated. "Gertrude, my dear, I insist that you come away at once. I don't know what he will say next."

Miss Trevor laughed.

"I like to hear you two squabbling," she said. "Please go on, it amuses me!"

"Yes, I will certainly go on," I returned. "Perhaps you heard her declare that she fears what I may say next. Of course she does. Allow me to tell you, Lady Hatteras, that you are a coward. If the truth were known, it would be found that you are trembling in your shoes at this moment. For two centimes, paid down, I would turn Queen's evidence, and reveal the whole plot."

"You had better not, sir," she replied, shaking a warning finger at me. "In that case the letters from home shall be withheld from you, and you will not know how your son and heir is progressing."

"I capitulate," I answered. "Threatened by such awful punishment I dare say no more. Miss Gertrude, will you not intercede for me?"

"I think that you scarcely deserve it," she retorted. "Even now you are keeping something back from me."

"Never mind, my dear, we'll let him off this time with a caution," said my wife, "provided he promises not to offend again. And now let us settle what we are going to do to-day."

When this important matter had been arranged, it was reported to us that the ladies were to spend the morning shopping, leaving the Duke and myself free to follow our own inclinations. Accordingly, when we had seen them safely on their way to the Merceria, we held a smoking council to arrange how we should pass the hours until lunch-time. As we discovered afterwards, we both had a certain thought in our minds, which for some reason we scarcely liked to broach to each other. It was settled, however, just as we desired, but in a fashion we least expected.

We were seated in the balcony outside our room, watching the animated traffic on the Grand Canal below, when a servant came in search of us and handed me a note. One glance at the characteristic writing was sufficient to show me that it was from Doctor Nikola. I opened it with an eagerness that I did not attempt to conceal, and read as follows —

"Dear Hatteras,

"If you have nothing more important on hand this morning, can you spare the time to come and see me? As I understand the Duke of Glenbarth is with you, will you not bring him also? It will be very pleasant to have a chat upon by-gone days, and, what is more, I fancy this old house will interest you.

"Yours very truly,

"Nikola."

"What do you say?" I inquired, when I had finished reading, "shall we go?"

"Let us do so by all means," the Duke replied. "It will be very interesting to meet Nikola once more. There is one thing, however, that puzzles me; how did he become aware of my arrival in Venice? You say he was with you on the piazza last night, so that he could not have been at the railway station, and as I haven't been outside since I came, except for the row after dinner, I confess it puzzles me."

"You should know by this time that it is useless to wonder how Nikola acquires his knowledge," I replied. "For my own part I should like to discover *his* reason for being in Venice. I am very curious on that point."

Glenbarth shook his head solemnly.

"If Nikola does not want us to know," he argued, "we shall leave his house as wise as we entered it. If he *does* let us know, I shall begin to grow suspicious, for in that case it is a thousand pounds to this half-smoked cigar that we shall be called upon to render him assistance. However, if you are prepared to run the risk I will do so also."

"In that case," I said, rising from my chair and tossing what remained of my cigar into the water below, "let us get ready and be off. We may change our minds."

Ten minutes later we had chartered a gondola and were on our way to the Palace Revecce.

As a general rule when one sets out to pay a morning call one is not the victim of any particular nervousness; on this occasion however both Glenbarth and I, as we confessed to each other afterwards, were distinctly conscious of being in a condition which would be described by persons of mature years as an unpleasant state of expectancy, but which by school-boys is denominated "funk." The Duke, I noticed, fidgeted with his cigar, allowed it to go out, and then sat with it in his mouth unlighted. There was a far-away look on his handsome face that told me that he was recalling some of the events connected with the time when he had been in Nikola's company. This proved to be the case, for as we turned from the Grand Canal into the street in which the palace is situated, he said —

"By the way, Hatteras, I wonder what became of Baxter, Prendergrast, and those other fellows?"

"Nikola may be able to tell us," I answered. Then I added after a short pause, "By Jove, what strange times those were."

"Not half so strange to my thinking as our finding Nikola in Venice," Glenbarth replied. "That is the coincidence that astonishes me. But see, here we are."

As he spoke the gondola drew up at the steps of the Palace Revecce, and we prepared to step ashore. As we did so I noticed that the armorial bearings of the family still decorated the posts on either side of the door, but by the light of day the palace did not look nearly so imposing as it had done by moonlight the night before. One thing about it was certainly peculiar. When we ordered the gondolier to wait for us he shook his head. Not for anything would he remain there longer than was necessary to set us down. I accordingly paid him off, and when we had ascended the steps we entered the building. On pushing open the door we found ourselves standing in a handsome courtyard, in the centre of which was a well, its coping elegantly carved with a design of fruit and flowers. A broad stone staircase at the further end led up to the floor above, but this, as was the case with everything else, showed unmistakable signs of having been allowed to fall to decay. As no concierge was to be seen, and there was no one in sight of whom we might make inquiries, we scarcely knew how to proceed. Indeed, we were just wondering whether we should take our chance and explore the lower regions in search of Nikola, when he appeared at the head of the staircase and greeted us.

"Good-morning," he said, "pray come up. I must apologize for not having been down-stairs to receive you."

By the time he had finished speaking he had reached us, and was shaking hands with Glenbarth with the heartiness of an old friend.

"Let me offer you a hearty welcome to Venice," he said to Glenbarth after he had shaken hands with myself. Then looking at him once more, he added, "If you will permit me to say so, you have changed a great deal since we last saw each other."

"And you, scarcely at all," Glenbarth replied.

"It is strange that I should not have done so," Nikola answered, I thought a little sadly, "for I think I may say without any fear of boasting that, since we parted at Pipa Lannu, I have passed through sufficient to change a dozen men. But we will not talk of that here. Let us come up to my room, which is the only place in this great house that is in the least degree comfortable."

So saying he led the way up the stairs, and then along a corridor, which had once been beautifully frescoed, but which was now sadly given over to damp and decay. At last, reaching a room in the front of the building, he threw open the door and invited us to enter. And here I might digress for a moment to remark, that of all the men I have ever met, Nikola possessed the faculty of being able to make himself comfortable wherever he might be, in the greatest degree. He would have been at home anywhere. As a matter of fact this particular apartment was furnished in a style that caused me considerable surprise. The room itself was large and lofty, while the walls were beautifully frescoed, the work of one Andrea Bunopelli, of whom I shall have more to say anon. The furniture was simple, but extremely good; a massive oak writing-table stood beside one wall, another covered with books and papers was opposite it, several easy-chairs were placed here and there, another table in the centre of the room supported various chemical paraphernalia, while books of all sorts and descriptions, in all languages and bindings, were to be discovered in every direction.

"After what you have seen of the rest of the house, this strikes you as being more homelike, does it not?" Nikola inquired, as he noticed the look of astonishment upon our faces. "It is a queer old place, and the more I see of it the stranger it becomes. Some time ago, and quite by chance, I became acquainted with its history; I do not mean the political history of the respective families that have occupied it; you can find that in any guide-book. I mean the real, inner history of the house itself, embracing not a few of the deeds which have taken place inside its walls. I wonder if you would be interested if I were to tell you that in this very room, in the year fifteen hundred and eleven, one of the most repellent and cold-blooded murders of the Middle Ages took place. Perhaps now that you have the scene before you you would like to hear the story. You would? In that case pray sit down. Let me offer you this chair, Duke," he continued, and as he spoke he wheeled forward a handsomely

carved chair from beside his writing-table. "Here, Hatteras, is one for you. I myself will take up my position here, so that I may be better able to retain your attention for my narrative."

So saying he stood between us on the strip of polished floor which showed between two heavy oriental rugs.

"For some reasons," he began, "I regret that the story I have to tell should run upon such familiar lines. I fancy, however, that the *dénouement* will prove sufficiently original to merit your attention. The year fifteen hundred and nine, the same which found the French victorious at Agnadello, and the Venetian Republic at the commencement of that decline from which it has never recovered, saw this house in its glory. The owner, the illustrious Francesco del Revecce, was a sailor, and had the honour of commanding one of the many fleets of the Republic. He was an ambitious man, a good fighter, and as such twice defeated the fleet of the League of Camberi. It was after the last of these victories that he married the beautiful daughter of the Duke of Levano, one of the most bitter enemies of the Council of Ten. The husband being rich, famous, and still young enough to be admired for his personal attractions; the bride one of the wealthiest, as well as one of the most beautiful women in the Republic, it appeared as if all must be well with them for the remainder of their lives. A series of dazzling *fêtes*, to which all the noblest and most distinguished of the city were invited, celebrated their nuptials and their possession of this house. Yet with it all the woman was perhaps the most unhappy individual in the universe. Unknown to her husband and her father she had long since given her love elsewhere; she was passionately attached to young Andrea Bunopelli, the man by whom the frescoes of this room were painted. Finding that Fate demanded her renunciation of Bunopelli, and her marriage to Revecce, she resolved to see no more of the man to whom she had given her heart. Love, however, proved stronger than her sense of duty, and while her husband, by order of the Senate, had put to sea once more in order to drive back the French, who were threatening the Adriatic, Bunopelli put into operation the scheme that was ultimately to prove their mutual undoing. Unfortunately for Revecce he was not successful in his venture, and by and by news reached Venice that his fleet had been destroyed, and that he himself had been taken prisoner. 'Now,' said the astute Bunopelli, 'is the time to act.' He accordingly took pens, paper, and his ink-horn, and in this very room concocted a letter which purported to bear the signature of the commander of the French forces, into whose hands the Venetian admiral had fallen and then was. Its meaning was plain enough. It proved that for a large sum of money Revecce had agreed to surrender the Venetian fleet, and, in order to secure his own safety, in case the Republic should lay hands on him afterwards, it was to be supposed that he himself had only been taken prisoner after a desperate resistance, as had really been the case. The letter was written, and that night the painter himself dropped it into the lion's mouth. Revecce might return now as soon as he pleased. His fate was prepared for him. Meanwhile the guilty pair spent the time as happily as was possible under the circumstances, knowing full well that should the man against whom they had plotted return to Venice, it would only be to find himself arrested, and with the certainty, on the evidence of the incriminating letter, of being immediately condemned to death. Weeks and months went by. At last Revecce, worn almost to a skeleton by reason of his long imprisonment, *did* manage to escape. In the guise of a common fisherman he returned to Venice; reached his own house, where a faithful servant recognized him and admitted him to the palace. From the latter's lips he learnt all that had transpired during his absence, and was informed of the villainous plot that had been prepared against him. His wrath knew no bounds; but with it all he was prudent. He was aware that if his presence in the city were discovered, nothing could save him from arrest. He accordingly hid himself in his own house and watched the course of events. What he saw was sufficient to confirm his worst suspicion. His wife was unfaithful to him, and her paramour was the man to whom he had been so kind a friend, and so generous a benefactor. Then when the time was ripe, assisted only by his servant, the same who had admitted him to his house, he descended upon the unhappy couple. Under threats of instant death he extorted from them a written confession of their treachery. After having made them secure, he departed for the council-chamber and demanded

to be heard. He was the victim of a conspiracy, he declared, and to prove that what he said was true he produced the confession he had that day obtained. He had many powerful friends, and by their influence an immediate pardon was granted him, while permission was also given him to deal with his enemies as he might consider most desirable. He accordingly returned to this house with a scheme he was prepared to put into instant execution. It is not a pretty story, but it certainly lends an interest to this room. The painter he imprisoned here."

So saying Nikola stooped and drew back one of the rugs to which I have already referred. The square outline of a trap-door showed itself in the floor. He pressed a spring in the wall behind him, and the lid shot back, swung round, and disappeared, showing the black abyss below. A smell of damp vaults came up to us. Then, when he had closed the trap-door again, Nikola drew the carpet back to its old position.

"The wretched man died slowly of starvation in that hole, and the woman, living in this room above, was compelled to listen to his agony without being permitted the means of saving him. Can you imagine the scene? The dying wretch below, doing his best to die like a man in order not to distress the woman he loved, and the outraged husband calmly pursuing his studies, regardless of both."

He looked from one to the other of us and his eyes burnt like living coals.

"It was brutish, it was hellish," cried Glenbarth, upon whom either the story, or Nikola's manner of narrating it, had produced an extraordinary effect. "Why did the woman allow it to continue? Was she mad that she did not summon assistance? Surely the Authorities of a State which prided itself upon its enlightenment, even in those dark ages, would not have tolerated such a thing?"

"You must bear in mind the fact that the Republic had given the husband permission to avenge his wrongs," said Nikola very quietly. "Besides, the woman could not cry out for the reason that her tongue had been torn out at the roots. When both were dead their bodies were tied together and thrown into the canal, and the same day Revecce set sail again, to ultimately perish in a storm off the coast of Sicily. Now you know one of the many stories connected with this old room. There are others in which that trap-door has played an equally important part. I fear, however, none of them can boast so dramatic a setting as that I have just narrated to you."

"How, knowing all this, you can live in the house passes my comprehension," gasped Glenbarth. "I don't think I am a coward, but I tell you candidly that I would not spend a night here, after what you have told me, for anything the world could give me."

"But surely you don't suppose that what happened in this room upwards of three hundred years ago could have any effect upon a living being to-day?" said Nikola, with what I could not help thinking was a double meaning. "Let me tell you, that far from being unpleasant it has decided advantages. As a matter of fact it gives me the opportunity of being free to do what I like. That is my greatest safeguard. I can go away for five years, if I please, and leave the most valuable of my things lying about, and come back to the discovery that nothing is missing. I am not pestered by tourists who ask to see the frescoes, for the simple reason that the guides take very good care not to tell them the legend of the house, lest they may be called upon to take them over it. Many of the gondoliers will not stop here after nightfall, and the few who are brave enough to do so, invariably cross themselves before reaching, and after leaving it."

"I do not wonder at it," I said. "Taken altogether it is the most dismal dwelling I have ever set foot in. Do you mean to tell me that you live alone in it?"

"Not entirely," he replied. "I have companions: an old man who comes in once a day to attend to my simple wants, and my ever-faithful friend –"

"Apollyon," I cried, forestalling what he was about to say.

"Exactly, Apollyon. I am glad to see that you remember him."

He uttered a low whistle, and a moment later the great beast that I remembered so well stalked solemnly into the room, and began to rub himself against the leg of his master's chair.

"Poor old fellow," continued Nikola, picking him up and gently stroking him, "he is growing very feeble. Perhaps it is not to be wondered at, for he is already far past the average age of the feline race. He has been in many strange places, and has seen many queer things since last we met, but never anything much stranger than he has witnessed in this room."

"What do you mean?" I inquired. "What has the cat seen in this room that is so strange?"

"Objects that we are not yet permitted to see," Nikola answered gravely. "When all is quiet at night, and I am working at that table, he lies curled up in yonder chair. For a time he will sleep contentedly, then I see him lift his head and watch something, or somebody, I cannot say which, moving about in the room. At first I came to the conclusion that it must be a bat, or some night bird, but that theory exploded. Bats do not remain at the same exact distance from the floor, nor do they stand stationary behind a man's chair for any length of time. The hour will come, however, when it will be possible for us to see these things; I am on the track even now."

Had I not known Nikola, and if I had not remembered some very curious experiments he had performed for my special benefit two years before, I should have inclined to the belief that he was boasting. I knew him too well, however, to deem it possible that he would waste his time in such an idle fashion.

"Do you mean to say," I asked, "that you really think that in time it will be possible for us to see things which at present we have no notion of? That we shall be able to look into the world we have always been taught to consider Unknowable?"

"I do mean it," he replied. "And though you may scarcely believe it, it was for the sake of the information necessary to that end that I pestered Mr. Wetherall in Sydney, imprisoned you in Port Said, and carried the lady, who is now your wife, away to the island in the South Seas."

"This is most interesting," I said, while Glenbarth drew his chair a little closer.

"Pray tell us some of your adventures since we last saw you," he put in. "You may imagine how eager we are to hear."

Thereupon Nikola furnished us with a detailed description of all that he had been through since that momentous day when he had obtained possession of the stick that had been bequeathed to Mr. Wetherall by China Pete. He told us how, armed with this talisman, he had set out for China, where he engaged a man named Bruce, who must have been as plucky as Nikola himself, and together they started off in search of an almost unknown monastery in Thibet. He described with a wealth of exciting detail the perilous adventures they had passed through, and how near they had been to losing their lives in attempting to obtain possession of a certain curious book in which were set forth the most wonderful secrets relating to the laws of Life and Death. He told us of their hair-breadth escapes on the journey back to civilization, and showed how they were followed to England by a mysterious Chinaman, whose undoubted mission was to avenge the robbery, and to obtain possession of the book. At this moment he paused, and I found an opportunity of asking him whether he had the book in his possession now.

"Would you care to see it?" he inquired. "If so, I will show it to you."

On our answering in the affirmative he crossed to his writing-table, unlocked a drawer, and took from it a small curiously bound book, the pages of which were yellow with age, and the writing so faded that it was almost impossible to decipher it.

"And now that you have plotted and planned, and suffered so much to obtain possession of this book, what use has it been to you?" I inquired, with almost a feeling of awe, for it seemed impossible that a man could have endured so much for so trifling a return.

"In dabbling with such matters," Nikola returned, "one of the first lessons one learns is not to expect immediate results. There is the collected wisdom of untold ages in that little volume, and when I have mastered the secret it contains, I shall, like the eaters of the forbidden fruit, possess a knowledge of all things, Good and Evil."

Replacing the book in the drawer he continued his narrative, told us of his great attempt to probe the secret of Existence, and explained to us his endeavour to put new life into a body already worn out by age.

"I was unsuccessful in what I set out to accomplish," he said, "but I advanced so far that I was able to restore the man his youth again. What I failed to do was to give him the power of thought or will. It was the brain that was too much for me, that vital part of man without which he is nothing. When I have mastered that secret I shall try again, and then, perhaps, I shall succeed. But there is much to be accomplished first. Only I know how much!"

I looked at him in amazement. Was he jesting, or did he really suppose that it was possible for him, or any other son of man, to restore youth, and by so doing to prolong life perpetually? Yet he spoke with all his usual earnestness, and seemed as convinced of the truth of what he said as if he were narrating some well-known fact. I did not know what to think.

At last, seeing the bewilderment on our faces, I suppose, he smiled, and rising from his chair reminded us that if we had been bored we had only ourselves to thank for it. He accordingly changed the conversation by inquiring whether we had made any arrangements for that evening. I replied that so far as I knew we had not, whereupon he came forward with a proposition.

"In that case," said he, "if you will allow me to act as your guide to Venice, I think I could show you a side of the city you have never seen before. I know her as thoroughly as any man living, and I think I may safely promise that your party will spend an interesting couple of hours. What have you to say to my proposal?"

"I am quite sure we shall be delighted," I replied, though not without certain misgivings. "But I think I had better not decide until I have seen my wife. If she has made no other arrangements, at what hour shall we start?"

"At what time do you dine?" he inquired.

"At seven o'clock," I replied. "Perhaps we might be able to persuade you to give us the pleasure of your company?"

"I thank you," he answered. "I fear I must decline, however. I am hermit-like in my habits so far as meals are concerned. If you will allow me I will call for you, shall we say at half-past eight? The moon will have risen by that time, and we should spend a most enjoyable evening."

"At half-past eight," I said, "unless you hear to the contrary," and then rose from my chair. Glenbarth followed my example, and we accordingly bade Nikola good-bye. Despite our protest, he insisted on accompanying us down the great staircase to the courtyard below, his terrible cat following close upon his heels. Hailing a gondola, we bade the man take us back to our hotel. For some minutes after we had said good-bye to Nikola we sat in silence as the boat skimmed over the placid water.

"Well, what is your opinion of Nikola now?" I said, as we turned from the Rio del Consiglio into the Grand Canal once more. "Has he grown any more commonplace, think you, since you last saw him?"

"On the contrary, he is stranger than ever," Glenbarth replied. "I have never met any other man who resembled him in the slightest degree. What a ghastly story that was! His dramatic telling of it made it appear so real that towards the end of it I was almost convinced that I could hear the groans of the poor wretch in the pit below, and see the woman wringing her hands and moaning in the room in which we were sitting. Why he should have told it to us is what I cannot understand, neither can I make out what his reasons can be for living in that house."

"Nikola's actions are like himself, entirely inexplicable," he answered. "But that he has some motive beyond the desire he expressed for peace and quiet, I have not the shadow of a doubt."

"And now with regard to to-night," said the Duke, I am afraid a little pettishly. "I was surprised when you accepted his offer. Do you think Lady Hatteras and Miss Trevor will care about such an excursion?"

"That is a question I cannot answer at present," I replied. "We must leave it to them to decide. For my own part, I can scarcely imagine anything more interesting."

When we reached Galaghetti's I informed my wife and Miss Trevor of Nikola's offer, half expecting that the latter, from the manner in which she had behaved at the mere mention of his name that morning, would decline to accompany us, and, therefore, that the excursion would fall through. To my surprise, however, she did nothing of the kind. She fell in with the idea at once, and, so far as we could see, without reluctance of any kind.

There was nothing for it, therefore, under these circumstances, but for me to fall back upon the old commonplace, and declare that women are difficult creatures to understand.

CHAPTER III

In the previous chapter I recorded the surprise I felt at Miss Trevor's acceptance of Doctor Nikola's invitation to a gondola excursion. Almost as suddenly as she had shown her fear of him, she had recovered her tranquillity, and the result, as I have stated, was complete perplexity on my part. With a united desire to reserve our energies for the evening, we did not arrange a long excursion for that afternoon, but contented ourselves with a visit to the church of SS. Giovanni e Paolo. Miss Trevor was quite recovered by this time, and in very good spirits. She and Glenbarth were on the most friendly terms, consequently my wife was a most happy woman.

"Isn't it nice to see them together?" she whispered, as we crossed the hall and went down the steps to our gondola. "They are suited to each other almost as – well, if I really wanted to pay you a compliment, which you don't deserve, I should say as we are. Do you notice how prettily she gives him her hand so that he may help her into the boat?"

"I do," I answered grimly. "And it only shows the wickedness of the girl. She is as capable of getting into the boat without assistance as he is."

"And yet you help her yourself every time you get the chance," my wife retorted. "I have observed you take the greatest care that she should not fall, even when the step has been one of only a few inches, and I have been left to get down by myself. Perhaps you cannot recall that day at Capri?"

"I have the happiest recollections of it," I replied. "I helped her quite half-a-dozen times."

"And yet you grudge that poor boy the opportunities that you yourself were once so eager to enjoy. You cannot deny it."

"I am not going to attempt to deny it," I returned. "I *do* grudge him his chances. And why shouldn't I? Has she not the second prettiest hands, and the second neatest ankle, in all Europe?"

My wife looked up at me with a suspicion of a smile hovering round her mouth. When she does that her dimples are charming.

"And the neatest?" she inquired, as if she had not guessed. Women can do that sort of thing with excellent effect.

"Lady Hatteras, may I help you into the gondola?" I said politely, and for some reason, best known to herself, the reply appeared to satisfy her.

Of one thing there could be no sort of doubt. Miss Trevor had taken a decided liking to Glenbarth, and the young fellow's delight in her company was more than equal to it. By my wife's orders I left them together as much as possible during the afternoon, that is to say as far as was consistent with the duties of an observant chaperon. For instance, while we were in the right aisle of the church, examining the mausoleum of the Doge, Pietro Mocenningo, and the statues of Lombardi, they were in the choir proper, before the famous tomb of Andrea Vendramin, considered by many to be the finest of its kind in Venice. As we entered the choir, they departed into the left transept. I fancy, however, Glenbarth must have been a little chagrined when she, playing her hand according to the recognized rules, suggested that they should turn back in search of us. Back they came accordingly, to be received by my wife with a speech that still further revealed to me the duplicity of women.

"You are two naughty children," she said, with fairly simulated wrath. "Where on earth have you been? We have been looking for you everywhere!"

"You are so slow," put in Miss Trevor, and then she added, without a quaver in her voice or blush upon her cheek, "We dawdled about in order to let you catch us up."

I thought it was time for me to interfere.

"Perhaps I should remind you young people that at the present moment you are in a church," I said. "Would it not be as well, do you think, for you to preserve those pretty little prevarications until you are in the gondola? You will be able to quarrel in greater comfort there. It will also give Phyllis time to collect her thoughts, and to prepare a new indictment."

My wife treated me to a look that would have annihilated another man. After that I washed my hands of them and turned to the copy of Titian's *Martyrdom of Saint Peter*, which Victor Emmanuel had presented to the church in place of the original, which had been destroyed. Later on we made our way, by a long series of tortuous thoroughfares, to the piazza of Saint Mark, where we intended to sit in front of Florian's *café* and watch the people until it was time for us to return and dress for dinner.

As I have already said, Miss Trevor had all the afternoon been in the best of spirits. Nothing could have been happier than her demeanour when we left the church, yet when we reached the piazza everything was changed. Apparently she was not really unhappy, nor did she look about her in the frightened way that had struck me so unpleasantly on the previous evening. It was only her manner that was strange. At first she was silent, then, as if she were afraid we might notice it, she set herself to talk as if she were so doing for mere talking's sake. Then, without any apparent reason, she became as silent as a mouse once more. Remembering what had happened that morning before breakfast, I did not question her, nor did I attempt to rally her upon the subject. To have done either would have been to have risked a recurrence of the catastrophe we had so narrowly escaped earlier in the day. I accordingly left her alone, and my wife, in the hope of distracting her attention, entered upon an amusing argument with Glenbarth upon the evils attendant upon excessive smoking, which was the young man's one, and, so far as I knew, only failing. Unable to combat her assertions he appealed to me for protection.

"Take my part, there's a good fellow," he said pathetically. "I am not strong enough to stand against Lady Hatteras alone."

"No," I returned; "you must fight your own battles. When I see a chance of having a little peace I like to grasp it. I am going to take Miss Trevor to Maya's shop on the other side of the piazza, in search of new photographs. We will leave you to quarrel in comfort here."

So saying Miss Trevor and I left them and made our way to the famous shop, where I purchased for her a number of photographs, of which she had expressed her admiration a few days before. After that we rejoined my wife and Glenbarth and returned to our hotel for dinner.

Nikola, as you may remember, had arranged to call for us with his gondola at half-past eight, and ten minutes before that time I suggested that the ladies should prepare themselves for the excursion. I bade them wrap up well, for I knew by experience that it is seldom warm upon the water at night. When they had left us the Duke and I strolled into the balcony.

"I hope to goodness Nikola won't frighten Miss Trevor this evening," said my companion, after we had been there a few moments. (I noticed that he spoke with an anxiety that was by no means usual with him.) "She is awfully sensitive, you know, and when he likes he can curdle the very marrow in your bones. I shouldn't have liked her to have heard that story he told us this morning. I suppose there is no fear of his repeating it to-night?"

"I should not think so," I returned. "Nikola has more tact in his little finger than you and I have in our whole bodies. He would be scarcely likely to make such a mistake. No, I rather fancy that to-night we shall see a new side of his character. For my own part I am prepared to confess that I am looking forward to the excursion with a good deal of pleasure."

"I am glad to hear it," Glenbarth replied, as I thought with a savour of sarcasm in his voice. "I only hope you won't have reason to regret it."

This little speech set me thinking. Was it possible that Glenbarth was jealous of Nikola? Surely he could not be foolish enough for that. That Miss Trevor had made an impression upon him was apparent, but it was full early for him to grow jealous, and particularly of such a man.

While I was thinking of this the ladies entered the room, and at the same moment we heard Nikola's gondola draw up at the steps. I thought Miss Trevor looked a little pale, but though still very quiet she was more cheerful than she had been before dinner.

"Our guide has arrived," I remarked, as I closed the windows behind us. "We had better go down to the hall. Miss Trevor, if you will accompany me, the Duke will bring Phyllis. We must not keep Nikola waiting."

We accordingly left our apartments and proceeded down-stairs.

"I trust you are looking forward to your excursion, Miss Trevor?" I said as we descended the stairs. "If I am not mistaken you will see Venice to-night under circumstances such as you could never have dreamed of before."

"I do not doubt it," she answered simply. "It will be a night to remember."

Little did she guess how true her prophecy was destined to be. It was indeed a night that every member of the party would remember all his, or her, life long. When we had reached the hall, Nikola had just entered it, and was in the act of sending up a servant to announce his arrival. He shook hands with my wife, then with Miss Trevor, afterwards with Glenbarth and myself. His hand was, as usual, as cold as ice and his face was deathly pale. His tall, lithe figure was concealed by his voluminous coat, but what was lost in one direction was compensated for by the mystery that it imparted to his personality. For some reason I thought of Mephistopheles as I looked at him, and in many ways the illustration does not seem an altogether inapt one.

"Permit me to express the gratification I feel that you have consented to allow me to be your guide this evening, Lady Hatteras," he said as he conducted my wife towards the boat. "While it is an impertinence on my part to imagine that I can add to your enjoyment of Venice, I fancy it is, nevertheless, in my power to show you a side of the city with which you are not as yet acquainted. The night being so beautiful, and believing that you would wish to see all you can, I have brought a gondola without a cabin. I trust I did not do wrong."

"I am sure it will be delightful," my wife answered. "It would have been unendurable on such a beautiful evening to be cooped up in a close cabin. Besides, we should have seen nothing."

By this time we were on the steps, at the foot of which the gondola in question, a large one of its class, was lying. As soon as we had boarded her the gondolier bent to his oar, the boat shot out into the stream, and the excursion, which, as I have said, we were each of us to remember all our lives, had commenced. If I shut my eyes now I can recall the whole scene: the still moonlit waters of the canal, the houses on one side of which were brilliantly illuminated by the moon, the other being entirely in the shadow. When we were in mid-stream a boat decorated with lanterns passed us. It contained a merry party, whose progress was enlivened by the strains of the invariable *Finiculi Finicula*. The words and the tune ring in my memory even now. Years before we had grown heartily sick of the song, now however it possessed a charm that was quite its own.

"How pretty it is," remarked my wife and Miss Trevor almost simultaneously. And the former added, "I could never have believed that it possessed such a wealth of tenderness."

"Might it not be the association that is responsible?" put in Nikola gravely. "You have probably heard that song at some time when you have been so happy that all the world has seemed the same. Hearing it to-night has unconsciously recalled that association, and *Finiculi Finicula*, once so despised, immediately becomes a melody that touches your heart-strings, and so wins for itself a place in your regard that it can never altogether lose."

We had crossed the canal by this time; the gondola with the singers proceeding towards the Rialto bridge. The echo of the music still lingered in our ears, and seemed the sweeter by the reason of the distance that separated us from it. Turning to the gondolier, who in the moonlight presented a picturesque figure in the stern of the boat, Nikola said something in Italian. The boat's head was immediately turned in the direction of a side-street, and a moment later we entered it. It is not my intention, nor would it be possible for me, to attempt to furnish you with a definite description of the route we followed. In the daytime I flatter myself that I have a knowledge of the Venice of the tourist; if you were to give me a pencil and paper I believe I should be able to draw a rough outline of the city, and to place St. Mark's Cathedral, Galaghetti's Hotel, the Rialto bridge, the Arsenal,

and certainly the railway station, in something like their proper positions. But at night, when I have left the Grand Canal, the city becomes a sealed book to me. On this particular evening every street, when once we had left the fashionable quarter behind us, seemed alike. There was the same darkness, the same silence, and the same reflection of the lights in the water. Occasionally we happened upon places where business was still being transacted, and where the noise of voices smote the air with a vehemence that was like sacrilege. A few moments would then elapse, and then we were plunged into a silence that was almost unearthly. All this time Nikola kept us continually interested. Here was a house with a history as old as Venice itself; there the home of a famous painter; yonder the birthplace of a poet or a soldier, who had fought his way to fame by pen or by sword. On one side of the street was the first dwelling of one who had been a plebeian and had died a Doge; while on the other side was that of a man who had given his life to save his friend. Nor were Nikola's illustrations confined to the past alone. Men whose names were household words to us had preceded us, and had seen Venice as we were seeing it now. Of each he could tell us something we had never heard before. It was the perfect mastery of his subject, like that of a man who plays upon an instrument of which he has made a lifelong study, that astonished us. He could rouse in our hearts such emotions as he pleased; could induce us to pity at one moment, and to loathing at the next; could make us see the city with his eyes, and in a measure to love it with his own love. That Nikola *did* entertain a deep affection for it was as certain as his knowledge of its history.

"I think I may say now," he said, when we had been absent from the hotel for upwards of an hour, "that I have furnished you with a superficial idea of the city. Let me attempt after this to show you something of its inner life. That it will repay you I think you will admit when you have seen it."

Once more he gave the gondolier an order. Without a word the man entered a narrow street on the right, then turned to the left, after which to the right again. What were we going to see next? That it would be something interesting I had not the least doubt. Presently the gondolier made an indescribable movement with his oar, the first signal that he was about to stop. With two strokes he brought the boat alongside the steps, and Nikola, who was the first to spring out, assisted the ladies to alight. We were now in a portion of Venice with which I was entirely unacquainted. The houses were old and lofty, though sadly fallen to decay. Where shops existed business was still being carried on, but the majority of the owners of the houses in the neighbourhood appeared to be early birds, for no lights were visible in their dwellings. Once or twice men approached us and stared insolently at the ladies of our party. One of these, more impertinent than his companions, placed his hand upon Miss Trevor's arm. In a second, without any apparent effort, Nikola had laid him upon his back.

"Do not be afraid, Miss Trevor," he said; "the fellow has only forgotten himself for a moment."

So saying he approached the man, who scrambled to his feet, and addressed him in a low voice.

"No, no, your excellency," the rascal whined; "for the pity of the blessed saints. Had I known it was you I would not have dared."

Nikola said something in a whisper to him; what it was I have not the least idea, but its effect was certainly excellent, for the man slunk away without another word.

After this little incident we continued our walk without further opposition, took several turnings, and at last found ourselves standing before a low doorway. That it was closely barred on the inside was evident from the sounds that followed when, in response to Nikola's knocks, some one commenced to open it. Presently an old man looked out. At first he seemed surprised to see us, but when his eyes fell upon Nikola all was changed. With a low bow he invited him, in Russian, to enter.

Crossing the threshold we found ourselves in a church of the smallest possible description. By the dim light a priest could be seen officiating at the high altar, and there were possibly a dozen worshippers present. There was an air of secrecy about it all, the light, the voices, and the precautions taken to prevent a stranger entering, that appealed to my curiosity. As we turned to leave the building the little man who had admitted us crept up to Nikola's side and said something in a low voice to him. Nikola replied, and at the same time patted the man affectionately upon the shoulder. Then with the

same obsequious respect the latter opened the door once more, and permitted us to pass out, quickly barring it behind us afterwards however.

"You have seen many churches during your stay in Venice, Lady Hatteras," Nikola remarked, as we made our way back towards the gondola, "I doubt very much, however, whether you have ever entered a stranger place of worship than that."

"I know that I have not," my wife replied. "Pray who were the people we saw there? And why was so much secrecy observed?"

"Because nearly all the poor souls you saw there are either suspected or wanted by the Russian Government. They are fugitives from injustice, if I may so express it, and it is for that reason that they are compelled to worship, as well as live, in hiding."

"But who are they?"

"Nihilists," Nikola answered. "A poor, hot-headed lot of people, who, seeing their country drifting in a wrong direction, have taken it into their heads to try and remedy matters by drastic measures. Finding their efforts hopeless, their properties confiscated, and they themselves in danger of death, or exile, which is worse, they have fled from Russia. Some of them, the richest, manage to get to England, some come to Venice, but knowing that the Italian police will turn them out *sans cérémonie* if they discover them, they are compelled to remain in hiding until they are in a position to proceed elsewhere."

"And you help them?" asked Miss Trevor in a strange voice, as if his answer were a foregone conclusion.

"What makes you think that?" Nikola inquired.

"Because the doorkeeper knew you, and you spoke so kindly to him."

"The poor fellow has a son," Nikola replied; "a hot-headed young rascal who has got into trouble in Moscow. If he is caught he will without doubt go to Siberia for the rest of his life. But he will *not* be caught."

Once more Miss Trevor spoke as if with authority, and in the same hushed voice.

"You have saved him?"

"He *has* been saved," Nikola replied. "He left for America this morning. The old fellow was merely expressing to me the gratification he felt at having got him out of such a difficulty. Now, here is our gondola. Let us get into it. We still have much to see, and time is not standing still with us."

Once more we took our places, and once more the gondola proceeded on its way. To furnish you with a complete *résumé* of all we saw would take too long, and would occupy too great a space. Let it suffice that we visited places, the mere existence of which I had never heard of before.

One thing impressed me throughout. Wherever we went Nikola was known, and not only known, but feared and respected. His face was a key that opened every lock, and in his company the ladies were as safe, in the roughest parts of Venice, as if they had been surrounded by a troop of soldiery. When we had seen all that he was able to show us it was nearly midnight, and time for us to be getting back to our hotel.

"I trust I have not tired you?" he said, as the ladies took their places in the gondola for the last time.

"Not in the least," both answered at once, and I fancy my wife spoke not only for herself but also for Miss Trevor when she continued, "we have spent a most delightful evening."

"You must not praise the performance until the epilogue is spoken," Nikola answered. "I have still one more item on my programme."

As he said this the gondola drew up at some steps, where a solitary figure was standing, apparently waiting for us. He wore a cloak and carried a somewhat bulky object in his hand. As soon as the boat came alongside Nikola sprang out and approached him. To our surprise he helped him into the gondola and placed him in the stern.

"To-night, Luigi," he said, "you must sing your best for the honour of the city."

The young man replied in an undertone, and then the gondola passed down a by-street and a moment later we were back in the Grand Canal. There was not a breath of air, and the moon shone full and clear upon the placid water. Never had Venice appeared more beautiful. Away to the right was the piazza, with the Cathedral of Saint Mark; on our left were the shadows of the islands. The silence of Venice, and there is no silence in the world like it, lay upon everything. The only sound to be heard was the dripping of the water from the gondolier's oar as it rose and fell in rhythmic motion. Then the musician drew his fingers across the strings of his guitar, and after a little prelude commenced to sing. The song he had chosen was the *Salve d'amora* from *Faust*, surely one of the most delightful melodies that has ever occurred to the brain of a musician. Before he had sung a dozen bars we were entranced. Though not a strong tenor his voice was one of the most perfect I have ever heard. It was of the purest quality, so rich and sweet that the greatest connoisseur could not tire of it. The beauty of the evening, the silence of the lagoon, and the perfectness of the surroundings, helped it to appeal to us as no music had ever done before. It was a significant proof of the effect produced upon us, that when he ceased not one of us spoke for some moments. Our hearts were too full for words. By the time we had recovered ourselves the gondola had drawn up at the steps of the hotel, and we had disembarked. The Duke and I desired to reward the musician; Nikola however begged us to do nothing of the kind.

"He sings to-night to please me," he said. "It would hurt him beyond words were you to offer him any other reward."

After that there was nothing more to be said, except to thank him in the best Italian we could muster for the treat he had given us.

"Why on earth does he not try his fortune upon the stage?" asked my wife, when we had disembarked from the gondola and had assembled on the steps. "With such a voice he might achieve a European reputation."

"Alas," answered Nikola, "he will never do that. Did you notice his infirmity?"

Phyllis replied that she had not observed anything extraordinary about him.

"The poor fellow is blind," Nikola answered very quietly. "He is a singing-bird shut up always in the dark. And now, good-night. I have trespassed too long upon your time already."

He bowed low to the ladies, shook hands with the Duke and myself, and then, before we had time to thank him for the delightful evening he had given us, was in his gondola once more and out in mid-stream. We watched him until he had disappeared in the direction of the Rio del Consiglio, after we entered the hotel and made our way to our own sitting-room.

"I cannot say when I have enjoyed myself so much," said my wife, as we stood talking together before bidding each other good-night.

"It has been delightful," said Glenbarth, whose little attack of jealousy seemed to have quite left him. "Have you enjoyed it, Hatteras?"

I said something in reply, I cannot remember what, but I recollect that, as I did so, I glanced at Miss Trevor's face. It was still very pale, but her eyes shone with extraordinary brilliance.

"I hope you have had a pleasant evening," I said to her a few moments later, when we were alone together.

"Yes, I think I can say that I have," she answered, with a far-away look upon her face. "The music was exquisite. The thought of it haunts me still."

Then, having bade me good-night, she went off with my wife, leaving me to attempt to understand why she had replied as she had done.

"And what do you think of it, my friend?" I inquired of Glenbarth, when we had taken our cigars out into the balcony.

"I am extremely glad we went," he returned quickly. "There can be no doubt that you were right when you said that it would show us Nikola's character in a new light. Did you notice with

what respect he was treated by everybody we met, and how anxious they were not to run the risk of offending him?"

"Of course I noticed it, and you may be sure I drew my own conclusions from it," I replied.

"And those conclusions were?"

"That Nikola's character is even more inexplicable than before."

After that we smoked in silence for some time. At last I rose and tossed what remained of my cigar over the rails into the dark waters below.

"It is getting late," I said. "Don't you think we had better bid each other good-night?"

"Perhaps we had, and yet I don't feel a bit tired."

"Are you quite sure that you have had a pleasant day?"

"Quite sure," he said, with a laugh. "The only thing I regret is having heard that wretched story this morning. Do you recall the gusto with which Nikola related it?"

I replied in the affirmative, and asked him his reason for referring to it now.

"Because I could not help thinking of it this evening, when his voice was so pleasant and his manner so kind. When I picture him going back to that house to-night, to that dreadful room, to sleep alone in that great building, it fairly makes me shudder. Good-night, old fellow. You have treated me royally to-day; I could scarcely have had more sensations compressed into my waking hours if I'd been a king."

CHAPTER IV

After our excursion through Venice with Nikola by night, an interval of a week elapsed before we saw anything of him. During that time matters, so far as our party was concerned, progressed with the smoothness of a well-regulated clock. In my own mind I had not the shadow of a doubt that Glenbarth was head over ears in love with Gertrude Trevor. He followed her about wherever she went; seemed never to tire of paying her attention, and whenever we were alone together, endeavoured to inveigle me into a discussion of her merits. That she had faults nothing would convince him.

Whether she reciprocated his good-feeling was a matter which, to my mind, there existed a considerable amount of doubt. Women are proverbially more secretive in these affairs than men, and if Miss Trevor entertained a warmer feeling than friendship for the young Duke, she certainly managed to conceal it admirably. More than once, I believe, my wife endeavoured to sound her upon the subject. She had to confess herself beaten, however. Miss Trevor liked the Duke of Glenbarth very much; she was quite agreed that he had not an atom of conceit in his constitution; he gave himself no airs; moreover, she was prepared to meet my wife half-way, and to say that she thought it a pity he did not marry. No, she had never heard that there was an American millionaire girl, extremely beautiful, and accomplished beyond the average, who was pining to throw her millions and herself at his feet! "And then," added my wife, in a tone that seemed to suggest that she considered it my fault that the matter had not been brought to a successful conclusion long since, "what do you think she said? 'Why on earth doesn't he marry this American? So many men of title do now-a-days.' What do you think of that? I can tell you, Dick, I could have shaken her!"

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