



The Journeyer

By Gary Jennings

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Now, in his new novel *The Journeyer*, Gary Jennings has imagined the half that Marco left unsaid as even more elaborate and adventurous than the tall tales thought to be lies. From the palazzi and back streets of medieval Venice to the sumptuous court of Kublai Khan, from the perfumed sexuality of the Levant to the dangers and rigors of travel along the Silk Road, Marco meets all manner of people, survives all manner of danger, and, insatiably curious, becomes an almost compulsive collector of customs, languages and women.

In more than two decades of travel, Marco was variously a merchant, a warrior, a lover, a spy, even a tax collector - but always a journeyer, unflagging in his appetite for new experiences, regretting only what he missed. Here - recreated and reimagined with all the splendor, the love of adventure, the zest for the rare and curious that are Jennings's hallmarks - is the epic account, at once magnificent and delightful, of the greatest real-life adventurer in human history.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Superb."--*The New York Times* on *The Journeyer*

"Astonishing and titillating."--*The Chicago Tribune* on *The Journeyer*

"Fabulous. . . .Sumptuous and exceedingly bawdy."--*The Washington Post* on *The Journeyer*

"He enlivens his picaresque story with wonderfully detailed descriptions of the landscape, climate, flora and fauna Polo encountered along the way. The real energy of Gary Jennings's narrative is devoted to those old standbys lust and bloodlust. His zeal for clinical description of sexual practices is matched only by his enthusiasm for the minutiae of Oriental torture. Pound for pound, *The Journeyer* is a classic."---Gene Lyons, *Newsweek*

"A novel of epic proportions."--*Library Journal* on *The Journeyer*

"As Gary Jennings did for pre-Hispanic Mexico in *Aztec*, he has enriched *The Journeyer* with an anthropologist's knowledge of diverse lands and cultures. . . . Jennings combines inexhaustible research with the yarn-spinner's art, drawing indelible portraits of Marco and his companions on the long journey. Stunning . . . You'll never want it to end."--*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"Perfect entertainment."--*Philadelphia Inquirer* on *The Journeyer*

"Employing both great sweep and meticulous detail, Gary Jennings has produced an impressively learned gem of the astounding and the titillating."--*Chicago Tribune Book World* on *The Journeyer*

"A first-rate narrative. . . .spiced with bawdy tales and bizarre customs . . . Sensual delights. . . Jennings is a superb storyteller."--*Houston Post* on *The Journeyer*

"Wild adventure . . . endlessly intriguing . . . constantly surprising."--*Atlantic Monthly* on *The Journeyer*

"Relentlessly gripping."--*Publishers Weekly* on *The Journeyer*

"Remarkable . . .Extraordinary . . ."

About the Author

Gary Jennings was known for the rigorous and intensive research behind his books, which often included hazardous travel exploring every corner of Mexico for his Aztec novels, retracing the numerous wanderings of Marco Polo for *The Journeyers*, joining nine different circuses for *Spangle*, and roaming the Balkans for *Raptor*. Born in Buena Vista, Virginia in 1928, Jennings passed away in 1999 in Pompton Lakes, New Jersey, leaving behind a rich legacy of historical fiction and outlines for new novels.

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Journeyer, The
VENICE

1

ALTHOUGH the Polo family has been Venetian, and proud of it, for perhaps three hundred years now, it did not originate on this Italian peninsula, but on the other side of the Adriatic Sea. Yes, we were originally from Dalmatia, and the family name would then have been something like Pavlo. The first of my forebears to sail to Venice, and stay here, did so sometime after the year 1000. He and his descendants must have risen rather quickly to prominence in Venice, for already in the year 1094 a Domènico Polo was a member of the Grand Council of the Republic, and in the following century so was a Piero Polo.

The most remote ancestor of whom I have even a dim recollection was my grandfather Andrea. By his time, every man of our house of Polo was officially designated an Ene Aca (meaning N.H., which in Venice means Nobilis Homo or gentleman), and was addressed as Messere, and we had acquired the family arms: a field argent bearing three birds sable with beaks gules. This is actually a visual play on words, for that emblematic bird of ours is the bold and industrious jackdaw, which is called in the Venetian tongue the pola.

Nono Andrea had three sons: my uncle Marco, for whom I was named, my father Nicolò and my uncle Mafio. What they did when they were boys I do not know, but when they grew up, the eldest son, Marco, became the Polo trading company's agent in Constantinople in the Latin Empire, while his brothers remained in Venice to manage the company's headquarters and keep up the family palazzo. Not until after Nono Andrea's death did Nicolò and Mafio scratch the itch to go traveling themselves, but when they did they went farther than any Polo before them had gone.

In the year 1259, when they sailed away from Venice, I was five years old. My father had told my mother that they intended to go only as far as Constantinople, to visit their long-absent elder brother. But, as that brother eventually reported to my mother, after they had stayed with him there for a time, they took a notion to go on eastward. She never heard another report of them, and, after a twelvemonth, she decided they must be dead. That was not just the vaporings of an abandoned and grieving woman; it was the most likely possible surmise. For it was in that year of 1259 that the barbarian Mongols, having conquered all the rest of the Eastern world, pushed their implacable advance to the very gates of Constantinople. While every other white man was fleeing or quailing before "the Golden Horde," Mafio and Nicolò Polo had gone marching foolhardily right into their front line--or, considering how the Mongols were then regarded, better say: into their slaving and champing jaws.

We had reason to regard the Mongols as monsters, did we not? The Mongols were something more and something less than human, were they not? More than human, in their fighting ability and physical endurance. Less than human, in their savagery and lust for blood. Even their everyday food was known to be reeking raw meat and the rancid milk of mares. And it was known that, when a Mongol army ran out of those rations, it would unhesitatingly cast lots to choose every tenth man of its ranks to be slaughtered for food for the others. It was known that every Mongol warrior wore leather armor only on his breast, not his back; so that, if he ever *did* feel cowardice, he could not turn and run from an opponent. It was known that the Mongols polished their leather armor with grease, and they procured that grease by boiling down their human victims. All those things were known in Venice, and were repeated and retold, in hushed voices of horror, and some of those things were even true.

I was just five years old when my father went away, but I could share the universal dread of those savages from the East, for I was already familiar with the spoken threat: "The Mongols will get you! The orda will get you!" I had heard that all through my childhood, and so had every other little boy whenever he required admonishment. "The orda will get you if you do not eat up all your supper. If you do not go straight to bed. If you do not cease your noise." The orda was wielded by mothers and governesses, in those times, as they had earlier threatened their misbehaving children with "The orco will get you!"

The orco is the demon giant that mothers and nursemaids have forever kept on call, so it was no strain for them to substitute the word orda: the horde. And the Mongol horde was assuredly the more real and believable monster; the women invoking it did not have to feign the fright in their voices. The fact that they

even knew that word is evidence that they had reason to fear the orda as much as any child did. For it was the Mongols' own word, *yurtu*, originally meaning the great pavilioned tent of the chieftain of a Mongol encampment, and it was adopted, only slightly changed, into all the European languages, to mean what Europeans thought of when they thought of Mongols--a marching mob, a teeming mass, an irresistible swarm, a horde.

But I did not much longer hear that threat from my mother. As soon as she decided that my father was dead and gone, she commenced to languish and dwindle and weaken. When I was seven years old, she died. I have only one recollection of her, from a few months before that. The last time she ventured outside our Casa Polo, before she took to her bed and never got up again, was to accompany me on the day I was enrolled in school. Indeed, although that day was in another century, nearly sixty years ago, I recall it quite clearly. At that time, our Ca' Polo was a small palazzo in the city's confino of San Felice. In the bright morning hour of *mezza-terza*, my mother and I came out the house door onto the cobbled street alongside the canal. Our old boatman, the black Nubian slave Michièl, was waiting with our *batèlo* moored to its striped pole, and the boat was freshly waxed for the occasion, gleaming in all its colors. My mother and I got into it and seated ourselves under the canopy. Also for the occasion, I was dressed in new and fine raiment: a tunic of brown Lucca silk, I remember, and hose soled with leather. So, as old Michièl rowed us down the narrow Rio San Felice, he kept exclaiming things like "Che zentilòmo!" and "Dassèno, xestu, Messer Marco?"--meaning "Quite the gentleman!" and "Truly, is that you, Master Marco?"--which unaccustomed admiration made me feel proud and uncomfortable. He did not desist until he turned the *batèlo* into the Grand Canal, where the heavy boat traffic required all his attention.

That day was one of Venice's best sort of days. The sun was shining, but its light lay on the city in a manner more diffused than sharp-edged. There was no sea mist or land haze, for the sunlight was by no means diminished. Rather, the sun seemed to shine not in direct beams, but with a more subtle luminosity, the way candles glow when they are set in a many-crystaled chandelier. Anyone who knows Venice has known that light : as if pearls had been crushed and powdered--pearl-colored pearls and the pale pink ones and the pale blue--and that powder ground so fine that its particles hung in the air, not dimming the light but making it more lustrous yet soft at the same time. And the light came from other places than the sky alone. It was reflected from the canals' dancing waters, so it put dapples and spangles and roundels of that pearl-powder light bouncing about on all the walls of old wood and brick and stone, and softened their rough textures as well. That day had a gentling bloom on it like the bloom on a peach.

Our boat slid under the Grand Canal's one bridge, the Ponte Rialto --the old, low, pontoon bridge with the swing-away center section; it had not then been rebuilt as the arched drawbridge it is now. Then we passed the Erbaria, the market where young men, after a night of wine, go strolling in the early morning to clear their heads with the fragrance of its flowers and herbs and fruits. Then we turned off the canal again into another narrow one. A little way up that, my mother and I debarked at the Campo San Todaro. Around that square are situated all the lower-grade schools of the city, and at that hour the open space seethed with boys of all ages, playing, running, chattering, wrestling, while they waited for the school day to begin.

My mother presented me to the school maistro, presenting him also with the documents pertaining to my birth and to my registry in the Libro d'Oro. ("The Golden Book" is the popular name for the Register of Protocol in which the Republic keeps the records of all its Ene Aca families.) Fra Varisto, a very stout and forbidding man in voluminous robes, appeared less than impressed by the documents. He looked at them and snorted, "Brate!" which is a not very polite word meaning a Slav or Dalmatian. My mother countered with a ladylike sniff, and murmured, "Venezian nato e spuà."

"Venetian spawned and born, perhaps," rumbled the friar. "But Venetian *bred*, not yet. Not until he has endured proper schooling and the stiffening of school discipline."

He took up a quill and rubbed the point of it on the shiny skin of his tonsure, I suppose to lubricate its nib, then dipped it in an inkwell and opened a tremendous book. "Date of Confirmation?" he inquired. "Of First Communion?"

My mother told him and added, with some hauteur, that I had not, like most children, been allowed to forget

my Catechism as soon as I had been confirmed, but could still say it and the Creed and the Commandments on demand, as facily as I could say the Our Father. The maistro grunted, but made no additional notation in his big book. My mother then went on to ask some questions of her own: about the school's curriculum and its examinations and its rewards for achievement and its punishments for failure and ...

All mothers take their sons to school for the first time with a considerable pride, I suppose, but also, I think, with an equal measure of wariness and even sadness, for they are relinquishing those sons to a mysterious realm they never can enter. Almost no female, unless she is destined for holy orders, ever gets the least bit of formal schooling. So her son, as soon as he learns just so much as to write his own name, has vaulted somewhere beyond her reach forever after.

Fra Varisto patiently told my mother that I would be taught the proper use of my own language and of Trade French as well, that I would be taught to read and to write and to figure in numbers, that I would learn at least the rudiments of Latin from the *Timen* of Donadello, and the rudiments of history and cosmography from Callisthenes' *Book of Alexander*, and religion from Bible stories. But my mother persisted with so many other anxious questions that the friar finally said, in a voice mingling compassion and exasperation, "Dona e Madona, the boy is merely being enrolled in school. He is not taking the veil. We will immurehim merely during the daylight hours. You will still have him the rest of the time."

She had me for the rest of her life, but that was not long. So thereafter I heard the threat that "the Mongols will get you if" only from Fra Varisto at school, and at home from old Zulià. This was a woman who really was a Slav, born in some back corner of Bohemia, and clearly of peasant stock, for she always walked like a washerwoman waddling with a full wash bucket dangling from either hand. She had been my mother's personal maid since before I was born. After my mother's death, Zulià took her place as my nurse and monitor, and took the courtesy title of Aunt. In assuming the task of raising me up to be a decent and responsible young man, Zia Zulià did not exert much strictness--apart from frequently invoking the orda--nor did she, I must confess, have much success in her self-appointed task.

In part, this was because my namesake Uncle Marco had not come back to Venice after the disappearance of his two brothers. He had for too long made his home in Constantinople, and was comfortable there, although by this time the Latin Empire had succumbed to the Byzantine. Since my other uncle and my father had left the family business in the keeping of expert and trustworthy clerks, and the family palazzo in the keeping of similarly efficient domestics, Zio Marco left them so. Only the most weighty but least urgent matters were referred to him, by courier vessel, for his consideration and decision. Managed in that manner, both the Compagnia Polo and the Ca' Polo went on functioning as well as ever.

The one Polo property that malfunctioned was myself. Being the last and sole male scion of the Polo line--the only one in Venice, anyway--I had to be tenderly preserved, and I knew it. Though I was not of an age to have any say in the management of either the business or the house (fortunately), neither was I answerable to any adult authority for my own actions. At home I demanded my own way, and I got it. Not Zia Zulià, nor the maggiordomo, old Attilio, nor any of the lesser servants dared to raise a hand against me, and seldom a voice. My Catechism I never again recited, and soon forgot all the responses. At school I began to shirk my lessons. When Fra Varisto despaired of wielding the Mongols and resorted to wielding a ferrule, I simply stayed away from school.

It is a small wonder that I got as much formal education as I did. But I remained in school long enough to learn to read and write and do arithmetic and speak the Trade French of commerce, mainly because I knew I should need those abilities when I grew old enough to take over the family business. And I learned what history of the world, and what description of it, is supplied by *The Book of Alexander*. I absorbed all of that, mainly because the great Alexander's journeys of conquest had taken him eastward, and I could imagine my father and uncle having followed some of the same trails. But I saw little likelihood of my ever needing a knowledge of Latin, and it was when my school class had its collective nose forced into the boring rules and precepts of the *Timen* that I pointed my nose elsewhere.

Though my seniors loudly lamented and predicted dire ends for me, I really do not think that my willfulness signified that I was an evil child. My chief besetting sin was curiosity, but of course that is a sin by our

Western standards. Tradition insists that we behave in conformity with our neighbors and peers. The Holy Church demands that we believe and have faith, that we stifle any questions or opinions derived from our own reasoning. The Venetian mercantile philosophy decrees that the only palpable truths are those numerated on the bottommost ledger line where debits and credits are balanced.

But something in my nature rebelled against the constraints accepted by all others of my age and class and situation. I wished to live a life beyond the rules and the ruled ledger lines and the lines written in the Missal. I was impatient and perhaps distrustful of received wisdom, those morsels of information and exhortation so neatly selected and prepared and served up like courses of a meal, for consumption and assimilation. I much preferred to make my own hunt for knowledge, even if I found it raw and unpalatable to chew and nauseating to swallow, as often I would do. My guardians and preceptors accused me of lazy avoidance of the hard work required to gain an education. They never realized that I had chosen to follow a far harder path, and would follow it--wherever it led--from that childhood time through all the years of my manhood. On the days when I stayed away from the school and could not go home, I had to idle the days away somewhere, so sometimes I loitered about the establishment of the Compagnia Polo. It was situated then, as now, on the Riva Ca' de Dio, the waterfront esplanade which looks directly out onto the lagoon. On the water side, that esplanade is fringed with wooden quays, between which are ships and boats moored stem to stern and side by side. There are vessels of small and medium size: the shallow-draft batèli and gòndole of private houses, the bragozi fishing boats, the floating saloons called burchielli. And there are the much grander seagoing galleys and galeazze of Venice, interspersed with English and Flemish cogs, Slavic trabacoli and Levantine caïques. Many of those ocean vessels are so large that their stems and bowsprits overhang the street, and cast a latticed shadow on its cobbles, almost all the way to the variegated building fronts that line the esplanade's landward side. One of those buildings was (and still is) ours: a cavernous warehouse, with one little interior space of it partitioned off for a counting room.

I liked the warehouse. It was aromatic of all the smells of all the countries of the world, for it was heaped and piled with sacks and boxes and bales and barrels of all the world's produce--everything from Barbary wax and English wool to Alexandria sugar and Marseilles sardines. The warehouse workers were heavily muscled men, hung about with hammers, fist-hooks, coils of rope and other implements. They were forever busy, one man perhaps wrapping in burlap a consignment of Cornish tinware, another hammering the lid on a barrel of Catalonia olive oil, yet another shouldering a crate of Valencia soap out to the docks, and every man seeming always to be shouting some command like "logo!" or "a corando!" at the others.

But I liked the counting room, too. In that cramped coop sat the director of all that business and busy-ness, the old clerk Isidoro Priuli. With no apparent exertion of muscle, no rushing about or bellowing, no tools but his abaco, his quill and his ledger books, Maistro Doro controlled that crossroads of all the world's goods. With a little clicking of the abaco's colored counters and a scribble of ink in a ledger column, he could send to Bruges an ànfora of Corsican red wine and to Corsica, in exchange, a skein of Flanders lace, and, as the two items passed each other in our warehouse, dip off a metadella measure of the wine and snip off a braccio length of the lace to pay the Polos' profit on the transaction.

Because so many of the warehouse's contents were flammable, Isidoro did not allow himself the aid of a lamp or even a single candle to light his working space. Instead, he had arranged on the wall above and behind his head a large concave mirror made of real glass, which scooped in what light it could from the day outside and directed it down onto his high table. Seated there at his books, Maistro Doro looked like a very small and shriveled saint with an oversized halo. I would stand peering over the edge of that table, marveling that just the twitch of the maistro's fingers could exercise so much authority, and he would tell me things about the work in which he took such pride.

"It was the heathen Arabs, my boy, who gave the world these curlicue marks representing numbers, and this abaco for counting them with. But it was Venice that gave the world this system of *keeping* account--the books with facing pages for double entry. On the left, the debits. On the right, the credits."

I pointed to an entry on the left: "to the account of Messer Domeneddio," and asked, just for instance, who that Messere might be.

"Mefè!" the maistro exclaimed. "You do not recognize the name under which our Lord God does business?" He flipped over the pages of that ledger to show me the flyleaf in the front, with its inked inscription: "In the name of God and of Profit."

"We mere mortals can take care of our own goods when they are secure here in this warehouse," he explained. "But when they go out in flimsy ships upon the hazardous seas, they are at the mercy of--who else but God? So we count Him a partner in our every enterprise. In our books He is allotted two full shares of every transaction at venture. And if that venture succeeds, if our cargo safely reaches its destination and pays us the expected profit, why then those two shares are entered to il conto di Messer Domeneddio, and at the end of each year, when our dividends are apportioned, they are paid to Him. Or rather, to His factor and agent, in the person of Mother Church. Every Christian merchant does the same."

If all my days stolen from school had been passed in such improving conversations, no one could have complained. I probably would have had a better education than I could ever have got from Fra Varisto. But inevitably my loitering about the waterfront brought me into contact with persons less admirable than the clerk Isidoro.

I do not mean to say that the Riva is in any sense a low-class street. While it teems with workmen, seamen and fishermen at all hours of the day, there are just as many well-dressed merchants and brokers and other businessmen, often accompanied by their genteel wives. The Riva is also the promenade, even after dark on fine nights, of fashionable men and women come merely to stroll and enjoy the lagoon breeze. Nevertheless, among those people, day or night, there lurk the louts and cutpurses and prostitutes and other specimens of the rabble we call the popolàzo. There were, for example, the urchins I met one afternoon on that Riva dockside, when one of them introduced himself by throwing a fish at me.

2

It was not a very large fish, and he was not a very large boy. He was of about my own size and age, and I was not hurt when the fish hit me between my shoulder blades. But it left a smelly slime on my Lucca silk tunic, which was clearly what the boy had intended, for he was clad in rags already redolent of fish. He danced about, gleefully pointing at me and singing a taunt:

Un ducato, un ducatòn! Bùtelo ... bùtelo ... zo per el cavròn!

That is merely a fragment of a children's chant, meant to be sung during a throwing game, but he had changed the last word of it into a word which, though I could not then have told you its meaning, I knew to be the worst insult one man can fling at another. I was not a man and neither was he, but my honor was obviously in dispute. I interrupted his dance of mockery by stepping up to him and striking him in the face with my fist. His nose gushed bright red blood.

In the next moment, I was flattened under the weight of four other rascals. My assailant had not been alone on that dockside, and he was not alone in resenting the fine clothes Zia Zulià made me don on school-days. For a while, our struggles made the dock planks rattle. Numerous of the passersby stopped to watch us, and some of the rougher sorts shouted things like "Gouge him!" and "Kick the beggar in his baggage!" I fought valiantly, but I could strike back at only one boy at a time, while they all five were pummeling me. Before long, I had the wind knocked out of me and my arms pinned down. I simply lay there being beaten and kneaded like pasta dough.

"Let him up!" said a voice from outside our entangled heap.

It was only a piping falsetto of a voice, but it was loud and commanding. The five boys stopped pounding on me, and one after another, although reluctantly, peeled off me. Even when I was unencumbered, I still had to lie there for a bit and get my breath back before I could stand.

The other boys were shuffling their bare feet and sullenly regarding the owner of the voice. I was surprised to see that they had obeyed a mere girl. She was as ragged and aromatic as they were, but smaller and younger than any of them. She wore the short, tight, tubelike dress worn by all Venetian girl children until about the age of twelve--or I should say she wore the remains of one. Hers was so tattered that she would have been quite indecently exposed, except that what showed of her body was the same dingy gray color as her frock. Perhaps she derived some authority from the fact that she, alone of the urchins, wore shoes--the

cloglike wooden tofi of the poor.

The girl came close to me and maternally brushed at my clothes, which were now not very disparate from her own. She also informed me that she was the sister of the boy whose nose I had bloodied.

"Mama told Boldo never to fight," she said, and added, "Papà told him always to fight his own fights without help."

I said, panting, "I wish he had listened to one of them."

"My sister is a liar! We do not have a mama or a papà!"

"Well, if we did, that is what they would tell you. Now pick up that fish, Boldo. It was hard enough to steal."

To me she said, "What is your name? He is Ubaldo Tagiabue and I am Doris."

Tagiabue means "built like an ox," and I had learned in school that Doris was the daughter of the pagan god Oceanus. This Doris was too pitifully skinny to merit the surname, and far too dirty to resemble any water goddess. But she stood staunch as the ox, imperious as the goddess, as we watched her brother obediently go to pick up the discarded fish. He could not exactly pick it up; it had several times been stepped on during the brawl; he had more or less to gather it up.

"You must have done something terrible," Doris said to me, "to have made him throw our supper at you."

"I did nothing at all," I said truthfully. "Until I hit him. And that was because he called me a cavròn."

She looked amused and asked, "Do you know what that means?"

"Yes, it means one must fight."

She looked even more amused and said, "A cavròn is a man who lets his wife be used by other men."

I wondered why, if that was all it meant, the word should be such a deadly insult. I knew of several men whose wives were washerwomen or seamstresses, and those women's services were used by many other men, and that excited no public commotion or private vendèta. I made some remark to that effect, and Doris burst out laughing.

"Marcolfo!" she jeered at me. "It means the men put their candles into the woman's scabbard and together they do the dance of San Vito!"

No doubt you can divine the street meaning of her words, so I will not tell you the bizarre picture they brought to my ignorant mind. But some respectably merchant-looking gentlemen were strolling nearby at that moment, and they recoiled from Doris, their various mustaches and beards bristling like quills, when they heard those obscenities shouted by so small a female child.

Bringing the mangled corpse of his fish cradled in his grimy hands, Ubaldo said to me, "Will you share our supper?" I did not, but in the course of that afternoon he and I forgot our quarrel and became friends.

He and I were perhaps eleven or twelve years old then, and Doris about two years younger, and during the next few years I spent most of my days with them and their somewhat fluid following of other dockside brats. I could easily have been consorting in those years with the well-fed and well-dressed, prim and priggish offspring of the lustrissimi families, such as the Balbi and the Cornari--and Zia Zulià used every effort and persuasion to make me do so--but I preferred my vile and more vivacious friends. I admired their pungent language, and I adopted it. I admired their independence and their fichèvelo attitude to life, and I did my best to imitate it. As could be expected, since I did not slough off those attitudes when I went home or elsewhere, they did not make me any better beloved by the other people in my life.

During my infrequent attendances at school, I began calling Fra Varisto by a couple of nicknames I had learned from Boldo--"il bel de Roma" and "il Culiseo"--and soon had all the other schoolboys doing the same. The friar-maistro put up with that informality, even seemed flattered by it, until gradually it dawned on him that we were not likening him to the grand old Beauty of Rome, the Colosseum, but were making a play on the word culo, and in effect were calling him the "landmark of buttocks." At home, I scandalized the servants almost daily. On one occasion, after I had done a thing reprehensible, I overheard a conversation between Zia Zulià and Maestro Attilio, the maggiordomo of the household.

"Crispo!" I heard the old man exclaim. That was his fastidious way of uttering a profanity without actually saying the words "per Cristo!" but he managed, anyway, to sound outraged and disgusted. "Do you know what the whelp has done now? He called the boatman a black turd of merda, and now poor Michièl is

dissolving in tears. It is an unforgivable cruelty to speak so to a slave, and remind him that he is a slave."

"But Attilio, what can I do?" whimpered Zulià. "I cannot beat the boy and risk injuring his precious self."

The chief servant said sternly, "Better he be beaten young, and here in the privacy of his home, than that he grow up to earn a public scourging at the pillars."

"If I could keep him always under my eye ..." sniffled my nena. "But I cannot chase him throughout the city. And since he took to running with those popolàzo boat children ..."

"He will be running with the bravi next," growled Attilio, "if he lives long enough. I warn you, woman: you are letting that boy become a real bimbo viziato."

A bimbo viziato is a child spoiled to rottenness, which is what I was, and I would have been delighted with a promotion from bimbo to bravo. In my childishness, I thought the bravi were what their name implies, but of course they are anything but brave.

The skulking bravi are the modern Vandals of Venice. They are young men, sometimes of good family, who have no morals and no useful employment, and no ability except low cunning and perhaps someswordsmanship, and no ambition except to earn an occasional ducat for committing a sneak murder. They are sometimes hired for that purpose by politicians seeking a short road to preferment, or merchants seeking to eliminate competition by the easiest means. But, ironically, the bravi are more often utilized by *lovers*--to dispose of an impediment to their love, like an inconvenient husband or a jealous wife. If, in daytime, you should see a young man swaggering about with the air of a cavaliere errante, he is either a bravo or wishes to be mistaken for one. But if you should meet a bravo by night, he will be masked and cloaked, and wearing modern chain mail under his cloak, and lurking furtively far from any lamplight, and when he stabs you with sword or stilètto, it will be in the back.

This is no digression from my history, for I did live to become a bravo. Of sorts.

However, I was speaking of the time when I was still a bimbo viziato, when Zia Zulià complained of my being so often in the company of those boat children. Of course, considering the foul mouth and abominable manners I acquired from them, she had good reason to disapprove. But only a Slav, not Venice-born, would have thought it unnatural that I should loiter about the docks. I was a Venetian, so the salt of the sea was in my blood, and it urged me seaward. I was a boy, so I did not resist the urge, and to consort with the boat children was as close as I could then get to the sea.

I have, since then, known many seaside cities, but I have known none that is so nearly a part of the sea as is this Venice. The sea is not just our means of livelihood--as it is also for Genoa and Constantinople and the Cherbourg of the fictional Bauduin--here it is indissoluble from our lives. It washes about the verge of every island and islet composing Venice, and through the city's canals, and sometimes--when the wind and the tide come in from the same quarter--it laps at the very steps of the Basilica of San Marco, and a gondolier can row his boat among the portal arches of Samarco's great piazza.

Only Venice, of all the world's port cities, claims the sea for its bride, and annually affirms that espousal with priests and panoply. I watched the ceremony again just last Thursday. That was Ascension Day, and I was one of the honored guests aboard the gold-encrusted bark of our Doge Zuàne Soranzo. His splendid buzino d'oro, rowed by forty oarsmen, was but one of a great fleet of vessels, crowded with seamen and fishermen and priests and minstrels and lustrisimi citizens, going in stately procession out upon the lagoon. At the Lido, the most seaward of our islands, Doge Soranzo made the ages-old proclamation, "Ti sposiamo, O mare nostro, in cigno di vero e perpetuo dominio," and threw into the water a gold wedding ring, while the priests led our waterborne congregation in a prayer that the sea might, in the coming twelvemonth, prove as generous and submissive as a human bride. If the tradition is true--that the same ceremony has been performed on every Ascension Day since the year 1000--then there is a considerable fortune of more than three hundred gold rings lying on the sea bottom off the beaches of the Lido.

The sea does not merely surround and pervade Venice: it is within every Venetian; it salts the sweat of his laboring arms, and the weeping or laughing tears of his eyes, and even the speech of his tongue. Nowhere else in the world have I heard men meet and greet each other with the glad cry of "*Che bon vento?*" That phrase means "What good wind?" and to a Venetian it means "What good wind has wafted you across the

sea to this happy destination of Venice?"

Ubaldo Tagiabue and his sister Doris and the other denizens of the docks had an even more terse greeting, but the salt was in that one, too. They said simply, "Sana capàna," which is short for a salute "to the health of our company," and assumes the understanding that what is meant is the company of boat people. When, after we had been acquainted for some time, they began to salute me with that phrase, I felt included, and proud to be so.

Those children lived, like a swarm of dock rats, in a rotting hulk of a tow barge mired in a mud flat off the side of the city that faces the Dead Lagoon and, beyond that, the little cemetery isle of San Michièl, or Isle of the Dead. They really spent only their sleeping hours inside that dark and clammy hull, for their waking hours had to be mainly devoted to scavenging bits of food and clothing. They lived almost entirely on fish because, when they could steal no other nutriment, they could always descend on the Fish Market at the close of each day, when, by Venetian law--to prevent any stale fish from ever being vended--the fishmongers have to scatter on the ground whatever stock is left unsold. There was always a crowd of poor people to scramble and fight for those leavings, which seldom consisted of anything tastier than molefish.

I did bring to my new friends what scraps I could save from the table at home, or pilfer from the kitchen. At least that put some vegetables in the children's diet when I fetched something like kale ravioli or turnip jam, and some eggs and cheese when I brought them a maccherone, and even good meat when I could sneak a bit of mortadella or pork jelly. Once in a while I provided some viand they found most marvelous. I had always thought that, on Christmas Eve, Father Baba brought to all Venetian children the traditional torta di lasagna of the season. But when, one Christmas Day, I carried a portion of that confection to Ubaldo and Doris, their eyes widened in wonder, and they exclaimed with delight at every raisin and pine-nut and preserved onion and candied orange peel they found among the pasta.

I also brought what clothing I could--outgrown or worn-out garb of my own for the boys and, for the girls, articles that had belonged to my late mother. Not everything fit everybody, but they did not mind. Doris and the other three or four girls paraded about, most proudly, in shawls and gowns so much too big for them that they tripped on the dragging ends. I even brought along--for my own wear when I was with the boat children--various of my old tunics and hose so derelict that Zia Zulià had consigned them to the household bin of dust rags. I would remove whatever fine attire I had left my house in, and leave that wedged among the barge's timbers, and dress in the rags and look just like another boat urchin, until it was time to change again and go home.

You might wonder why I did not give the children money instead of my meager gifts. But you must remember that I was as much of an orphan as any of them were, and under strict guardianship, and too young to make any dispensation from the Polo family coffers. Our household's money was doled out by the company, meaning by the clerk Isidoro Priuli. Whenever Zulià or the maggiordomo or any other servant had to buy any sort of supplies or provender for the Ca' Polo, he or she went to the markets accompanied by a page from the company. That page boy carried the purse and counted out the ducats or sequins or soldi as they were spent, and made a memorandum of every one. If there was anything I personally needed or wanted, and if I could put up a good argument, that thing would be bought for me. If I contracted a debt, it would be paid for me. But I never possessed, at any one time, more than a few copper bagatini of my own, for jingling money.

I did manage to improve the boat children's existence at least to the extent of improving the scope of their thievery. They had always filched from the mongers and hucksters of their own squalid neighborhood; in other words, from petty merchants who were not much less poor than they were, and whose goods were hardly worth the stealing. I led the children to my own higher-class confino, where the wares displayed for sale were of better quality. And there we devised a better mode of theft than mere snatch-and-run.

The Merceria is the widest, straightest and longest street in Venice, meaning that it is practically the *only* street that can be called wide or straight or long. Open-fronted shops line both sides of it and, between them, long ranks of stalls and carts do an even brisker business, selling everything from mercery to hourglasses, and all kinds of groceries from staples to delicacies.

Suppose we saw, on a meat man's cart, a tray of veal chops that made the children's mouths water. A boy named Daniele was our swiftest runner. So he it was who elbowed his way to the cart, seized up a handful of the chops and ran, nearly knocking down a small girl who had blundered into his path. Daniele continued running, stupidly it seemed, along the broad, straight, open Merceria where he was visible and easily pursued. So the meat man's assistant and a couple of outraged customers took out after him, shouting "alto!" and "salva!" and "al ladro!"

But the girl who had been shoved was our Doris, and Daniele had in that scuffling moment, unobserved, handed to her the stolen veal chops. Doris, still unnoticed in the commotion, quickly and safely disappeared down one of the narrow, twisty side alleys leading off the open area. Meanwhile, his flight being somewhat impeded by the crowds on the Merceria, Daniele was in peril of capture. His pursuers were closing in on him, and other passersby were clutching at him, and all were bellowing for a "sbiro!" The sbiri are Venice's apelike policemen, and one of them, heeding the call, was angling through the crowd to intercept the thief. But I was nearby, as I always contrived to be on those occasions. Daniele stopped running and I started, which made me seem the quarry, and I ran deliberately right into the sbiro's ape arms.

After being soundly buffeted about the ears, I was recognized, as I always was and expected to be. The sbiro and the angry citizens hauled me to my house not far from the Merceria. When the street door was hammered on, the unhappy maggiordomo Attilio opened it. He heard out the people's babble of accusation and condemnation and then wearily put his thumbprint on a pagherò, which is a paper promising to pay, and thereby committed the Compagnia Polo to reimburse the meat man for his loss. The sbiro, after giving me a stern lecture and a vigorous shaking, let go of my collar, and he and the crowd departed.

Though I did not have to interpose myself every time the boat children stole something--more often it was deftly managed, with both the grabber and the receiver getting clean away--nevertheless I was dragged to the Ca' Polo more times than I can remember. That did not much lessen Maestro Attilio's opinion that Zia Zulià had raised the first black sheep in the Polo line.

It might be supposed that the boat children would have resented the participation of a "rich boy" in their pranks, and that they would have resented the "condescension" implicit in my gifts to them. Not so. The popolàzo may admire or envy or even revile the lustrisimi, but they keep their active resentment and loathing for their fellow poor, who are, after all, their chief competitors in this world. It is not the rich who wrestle with the poor for the discarded molefish at the Fish Market. So when I came along, giving what I could and taking nothing, the boat people tolerated my presence rather better than if I had been another hungry beggar.

3

JUST to remind myself now and again that I was not of the popolàzo, I would drop in at the Compagnia Polo to luxuriate in its rich aromas and industrious activity and prosperous ambience. On one of those visits, I found on the clerk Isidoro's table an object like a brick, but of a more glowing red color, and lighter in weight, and soft and vaguely moist to the touch, and I asked him what it was.

Again he exclaimed, "My faith!" and shook his gray head and said, "Do you not recognize the very foundation of your family's fortune? It was built on those bricks of zafràn."

"Oh," I said, respectfully regarding the brick. "And what is zafràn?"

"Mefè! You have been eating it and smelling it and wearing it all your life! Zafràn is what gives that special flavor and yellow color to rice and polenta and pasta. What gives that unique yellow color to fabrics. What gives the women's favorite scent to their salves and pomades. A mèdego uses it, too, in his medicines, but what it does there I do not know."

"Oh," I said again, my respect somewhat less for such an everyday article. "Is that all?"

"All!" he blurted. "Hear me, marcolfo." That word is not an affectionate play on my name; it is addressed to any exceedingly stupid boy. "Zafràn has a history more ancient and more noble even than the history of Venice. Long before Venice existed, zafràn was used by the Greeks and Romans to perfume their baths. They scattered it on their floors to perfume whole rooms. When the Emperor Nero made his entry into Rome, the streets of *the entire city* were strewn with zafràn and made fragrant."

"Well," I said, "if it has always been so commonly available ..."

"It may have been common then," said Isidoro, "in the days when slaves were numerous and cost nothing. Zafràn is not common today. It is a scarce commodity, and therefore of much value. That one brick you see there is worth an ingot of gold of almost equal weight."

"Is it indeed?" I said, perhaps sounding unconvinced. "But why?"

"Because that brick was made by the labor of many hands and immeasurable zonte of land and a countless multitude of flowers."

"Flowers !"

Maistro Doro sighed and said patiently, "There is a purple flower called the crocus. When it blooms, it extends from that blossom three delicate stigmì of an orange-red color. Those stigmì are ever so carefully detached by human hands. When some millions of those dainty and almost impalpable stigmì are collected, they are either dried to make loose zafràn, what is called hay zafràn, or they are what is called 'sweated' and compressed together to make brick zafràn like this one. The arable land must be devoted to nothing but that crop, and the crocus blooms only once a year. That blooming season is brief, so many gatherers must work at the same time, and they must work diligently. I do not know how many zonte of land and how many hands are required to produce just one brick of zafràn in a year, but you will understand why it is of such extravagant value."

I was by now convinced. "And where do we buy the zafràn?"

"We do not. We grow it." He put on the table beside the brick another object; I would have said it was a bulb of ordinary garlic. "That is a culm of the crocus flower. The Compagnia Polo plants them and harvests from the blossoms."

I was astonished. "Not in Venice, surely!"

"Of course not. On the teraferma of the mainland southwest of here. I told you it requires innumerable zonte of terrain."

"I never knew," I said.

He laughed. "Probably half the people of Venice do not even know that the milk and eggs of their daily meals are extracted from animals, and that those animals must have dry land to live on. We Venetians are inclined to pay little attention to anything but our lagoon and sea and ocean."

"How long have we been doing this, Doro? Growing crocuses and zafràn?"

He shrugged. "How long have there been Polos in Venice? That was the genius of some one of your long-ago ancestors. After the time of the Romans, zafràn became too much of a luxury to cultivate. No one farmer could grow enough of it to make it worth his while. And even a landowner of great estates could not afford all the paid laborers that crop would require. So zafràn was pretty well forgotten. Until some early Polo remembered it, and also realized that modern Venice has almost as big a supply of slaves as Rome had. Of course, we now have to buy our slaves, not just capture them. But the gathering of crocus stigmì is not an arduous labor. It does not require strong and expensive male slaves. The puniest women and children can do it; weaklings and cripples can do it. So that was the cheap sort of slaves your ancestor bought; the sort the Compagnia Polo has been acquiring ever since. They are a motley sort, of all nations and colors--Moors, Lezghians, Circassians, Russniaks, Armeniyans--but their colors blend, so to speak, to make that red-gold zafràn."

"The foundation of our fortune," I repeated.

"It buys everything else we sell," said Isidoro. "Oh, we sell the zafràn too, for a price, when the price is right--to be used as a foodstuff, a dye, a perfume, a medicament. But basically it is our company's capital, with which we barter for all our other articles of merchandise. Everything from Ibiza's salt to Còrdoba's leather to Sardinia's wheat. Just as the house of Spinola in Genoa has the monopoly of trading in raisins, our Venetian house of Polo has the zafràn."

The only son of the Venetian house of Polo thanked the old clerk for that edifying lesson in high commerce and bold endeavor--and, as usual, sauntered off again to partake of the easy indolence of the boat children. As I have said, those children tended to come and go; there was seldom the same lot living in the derelict barge from one week to the next. Like all the grown-up popolàzo, the children dreamed of somewhere

finding a Land of Cockaigne, where they could shirk work in luxury instead of squalor. So they might hear of some place offering better prospects than the Venice waterfront, and they might stow away aboard an outbound vessel to get there. Some of them would come back after a while, either because they could not reach their destination or because they had and were disillusioned. Some never came back at all, because--we never knew--the vessel sank and they drowned, or because they were apprehended and thrown into an orphanage, or maybe because they did find "il paese di Cuccagna" and stayed there.

But Ubaldo and Doris Tagiabue were the constants, and it was from them that I got most of my education in the ways and the language of the lower classes. That education was not force-fed to me in the way Fra Varisto stuffed Latin conjugations into his schoolboys; rather, the brother and sister parceled it out to me in fragments, as I required it. Whenever Ubaldo would jeer at some backwardness or bewilderment of mine, I would realize that I lacked some bit of knowledge, and Doris would supply it.

One day, I remember, Ubaldo said he was going to the western side of the city, and going by way of the Dogs' Ferry. I had never heard of that, so I went along, to see what strange kind of boat he meant. But we crossed the Grand Canal by the quite ordinary agency of the Rialto Bridge, and I must have looked either disappointed or mystified, for he scoffed at me, "You are as ignorant as a cornerstone!" and Doris explained: "There is only one way to get from the eastern to the western side of the city, no? That is to cross the Grand Canal. Cats are allowed in boats, to catch the rats, but dogs are not. So the dogs can cross the canal only on the Ponte Rialto. So that is the Dogs' Ferry, no xe vero?"

Some of their street jargon I could translate without assistance. They spoke of every priest and monk as *le religioso*, which could mean "the stiff one," but it did not take me long to realize that they were merely twisting the word *religioso*. When, in fine summer weather, they announced that they were moving from the barge hulk to La Locanda de la Stela, I knew that they were not going to reside in any Starlight Inn; they meant that they would be sleeping outdoors for a season. When they spoke of a female person as *una largazza*, they were playing on the proper term for a girl, *la ragazza*, but coarsely suggesting that she was ample, even cavernous, in her genital aperture. As a matter of fact, the greater part of the boat people's language--and the greater part of their conversations, and their interests--dealt with such indelicate topics. I absorbed a lot of information, but it sometimes did more to confuse than to enlighten me.

Zia Zulià and Fra Varisto had taught me to refer to those parts between my legs--if I had to refer to them at all--as *le vergogne*, "the shames." On the docks I heard many other terms. The word *baggage* for a man's genital equipment was clear enough; and *candelòto* was an apt word for his erect organ, which is like a stout candle; and so was *fava* for the bulbous end of that organ, since it does somewhat resemble a broad bean; and so was *capèla* for the foreskin, which does enclose the *fava* like a little cloak or a little chapel. But it was a mystery to me why the word *lumaghèta* was sometimes spoken in reference to a woman's parts. I understood that a woman had nothing but an opening down there, and the word *lumaghèta* can mean either a small snail or the tiny peg with which a minstrel tunes each string of his lute.

Ubaldo and Doris and I were playing on a dock one day when a greengrocer came pushing his cart along the esplanade, and the boat wives ambled over to paw through his produce. One of the women fondled a large yellowish cucumber, and grinned and said, "Il mescolòto," and all the women cackled lasciviously. "The stirrer"--I could make out the implications of that. But then two lissome young men came strolling along the esplanade, arm in arm, walking with a sort of springiness in their step, and one of the boat women growled, "Don Meta and Sior Mona." Another woman glanced scornfully at the more delicate of the two young men and muttered, "That one wears a split seat in his hose." I had no notion of what they were talking about, and Doris's explanation did not tell me much:

"Those are the sorts of men who do with each other what a real man does only with a woman."

Well, *there* was the main flaw in my comprehension: I had no very clear idea of *what* a man did with a woman.

Mind you, I was not entirely benighted in the matter of sex, anymore than other upper-class Venetian children are--or, I daresay, upper-class children of any other European nationality. We may not consciously remember it, but we have all had an early introduction to sex, from our mothers or our nursemaids, or both.

It seems that mothers and nurses have known, from the beginning of time, that the best way to quiet a restless baby or put it easily to sleep is to do for it the act of masturbaziòn. I have watched many a mother do that to an infant boy whose bimbin was so tiny that she could only just manipulate it with her finger and thumb. Yet the wee organ lifted and grew, though not in proportion as a man's does, of course. As the woman stroked, the baby quivered, then smiled, then squirmed voluptuously. He did not ejaculate any spruzzo, but there was no doubt that he enjoyed a climax of release. Then his little bimbin shrank again to its littlest, and he lay quiet and soon he slept.

Assuredly my own mother often did that for me, and I think it is good that mothers do so. That early manipulation, besides being an excellent pacifier of the infant, clearly stimulates development in that part of him. The mothers in the Eastern countries do not engage in that practice, and the omission is sadly evident when their babies grow up. I have seen many Eastern men undressed, and almost all had organs pitifully minute in comparison to mine.

Although our mothers and nursemaids gradually leave off doing that, when their children are about two years old--that is, at the age when they are weaned from the breast milk and introduced to wine--nevertheless, every child retains some dim recollection of it. Therefore a boy is not puzzled or frightened when he grows to adolescence and that organ seeks attention of its own accord. When a boy wakes in the night with it coming erect under his hand, he knows what it wants.

"A cold sponge bath," Fra Varisto used to tell us boys at school. "That will quell the upstart, and avert the risk of its shaming you with the midnight stain."

We listened respectfully, but on our way home we laughed at him. Perhaps friars and priests do endure involuntary and surprising spruzzi, and feel embarrassed or somehow guilty on that account. But no healthy boy of my acquaintance ever did. And none would choose a cold douche in place of the warm pleasure of doing for his candelòto what his mother had done for it when it was just a bimbin. However, Ubaldo was contemptuous when he learned that those night games were the total extent of my sexual experience to date.

"What? You are still waging the war of the priests?" he jeered. "You have never had a girl?"

Once again uncomprehending, I inquired, "The war of the priests?"

"Five against one," Doris said, without a blush. She added, "You must get yourself a smanza. A compliant girl friend."

I thought about that and said, "I do not know any girls I could ask. Except you, and you are too young." She bridled and said angrily, "I may not have hair on my artichoke yet, but I am twelve, and that is of marrying age!"

"I do not wish to marry anybody," I protested. "Only to--"

"Oh, no!" Ubaldo interrupted me. "My sister is a *good* girl."

You might smile at the assertion that a girl who could talk as she did could be a "good" girl. But there you have evidence of one thing our upper and lower classes have in common: their reverent regard for a maiden's virginity. To the lustrisimi and the popolàzo alike, that counts for more than all other feminine qualities: beauty, charm, sweetness, demureness, whatever. Their women may be plain and malicious and ill-spoken and ungracious and slovenly, but they must retain unbroken that little tuck of maidenhead tissue. In that respect at least, the most primitive and barbarous savages of the East are superior to us: they value a female for attributes other than the bung in her hole.

To our upper classes, virginity is not so much a matter of virtue as of good business, and they regard a daughter with the same cool calculation as they would a slave girl in the market. A daughter or a slave, like a cask of wine, commands a better price if it is sealed and demonstrably untampered with. Thus they barter their daughters for commercial advantage or social enhancement. But the lower classes foolishly think that their betters have a high *moral* regard for virginity, and they try to imitate that. Also, they are more easily frightened by the thunders of the Church, and the Church demands the preservation of virginity as a sort of negative show of virtue, in the same way that good Christians show virtue by abstaining from meat during Lent.

But even in those days when I was still a boy, I found reason to wonder just how many girls, of any class,

really were kept "good" by the prevailing social precepts and attitudes. From the time I was old enough to sprout the first fuzz of "hair on my artichoke," I had to listen to lectures from Fra Varisto and Zia Zulià on the moral and physical dangers of consorting with bad girls. I listened with close attention to their descriptions of such vile creatures, and their warnings about them, and their inveighings against them. I wanted to make sure I would recognize any bad girl at first sight, because I hoped with all my heart that I would soon get to meet one. That seemed quite likely, because the main impression I got from those lectures was that the bad girls must considerably outnumber the good ones.

There is other evidence for that impression. Venice is not a very tidy city, because it does not have to be. All of its discards go straight into the canals. Street garbage, kitchen trash, the wastes from our chamber pots and licet closets, all gets dumped into the nearest canal and is soon flushed away. The tide comes in twice daily, and surges through every least waterway, roiling up whatever matter lies on the bottom or is crusted on the canal walls. Then the tide departs and takes all those substances with it, through the lagoon, out past the Lido and off to sea. That keeps the city clean and sweet-smelling, but it frequently afflicts fishermen with unwelcome catches. There is not one of them who has not many times found on his hook or in his net the glistening pale blue and purple cadaver of a newborn infant. Granted, Venice is one of the three most populous cities of Europe. Still, only half of its citizens are female, and of those perhaps only half are of childbearing age. So the fishermen's annual catch of discarded infants would seem to indicate a scarcity of "good" Venetian girls.

"There is always Daniele's sister Malgarita," said Ubaldo. He was not enumerating good girls, but quite the contrary. He was counting those females of our acquaintance who might serve to wean me from the war of the priests to a more manly diversion. "She will do it with anybody who will give her a bagatìn."

"Malgarita is a fat pig," said Doris.

"She is a fat pig," I concurred.

"Who are you to sneer at pigs?" said Ubaldo. "Pigs have a patron saint. San Tonio was very fond of pigs."

"He would not have been fond of Malgarita," Doris said firmly.

Ubaldo went on, "Also there is Daniele's mother. She will do it and not even ask a bagatìn."

Doris and I made noises of revulsion. Then she said, "There is someone down there waving at us."

We three were idling the afternoon away on a rooftop. That is a favorite occupation of the lower classes.

Because all the common houses of Venice are one story high, and all have flat roofs, their people like to stroll or loll upon them and enjoy the view. From that vantage, they can behold the streets and canals below, the lagoon and its ships beyond, and Venice's more elegant buildings that stand above the mass: the domes and spires of churches, the bell towers, the carved facades of palazzi.

"He is waving at me," I said. "That is our boatman, taking our batèlo home from somewhere. I might as well ride with him."

There was no necessity for me to go home before the bells began ringing the nighttime copri-fuoco, when all honest citizens who do not retire indoors are supposed to carry lanterns to show that they are abroad on honest errands. But, to be truthful, I was at that moment feeling a bit apprehensive that Ubaldo might insist on my immediately coupling with some boat woman or girl. I did not so much fear the adventure, even with a slattern like Daniele's mother; I feared making a fool of myself, not knowing what to *do* with her.

From time to time, I tried to atone for my being so often rude to poor old Michièl, so that day I took the oars from him and myself rowed us homeward, while he took his ease under the boat canopy. We conversed as we went, and he told me that he was going to boil an onion when he got to the house.

"What?" I said, unsure I had heard him right.

The black slave explained that he suffered from the bane of boatmen. Because his profession required him to spend most of his time with his backside on a hard and damp boat thwart, he was often troubled by bleeding piles. Our family mèdego, he said, had prescribed a simple allevement for that malady. "You boil an onion until it is soft, and you wad it well up in there, and you wind a cloth around your loins to hold it there. Truly, it does help. If you ever have piles, Messer Marco, you try that."

I said I would indeed, and forgot about it. I arrived home to be accosted by Zia Zulià.

"The good friar Varisto was here today, and he was so angry that his dear face was bright red, clear to his tonsure."

I remarked that that was not unusual.

She said warningly, "A marcolfo with no schooling should speak with a smaller mouth. Fra Varisto said you have been shirking your classes again. For more than a week this time. And tomorrow your class must be heard in recitation, whatever that is, by the Censori de Scole, whoever they are. It is required that you participate. The friar told me--and I am telling you, young man--you *will be* in school tomorrow."

I said a word that made her gasp, and stalked off to my room to sulk. I refused to come out even when called to supper. But by the time the coprifuoco was rung, my better instincts had begun to overcome my worse ones. I thought to myself: today when I behaved with kindness to old Michièl it gratified him; I ought to say a kindly word of apology to old Zulià.

(I realize that I have characterized as "old" almost all the people I knew in my youth. That is because they seemed so to my young eyes, though only a few of them really were. The company's clerk Isidoro and the chief servant Attilio were perhaps as old as I am now. But the friar Varisto and the black slave Michièl were no more than middle-aged. Zulià of course seemed old because she was about the same age as my mother, and my mother was dead; but I suppose Zulià was a year or two younger than Michièl.)

That night, when I determined to make amends to her, I did not wait for Zia Zulià to do her customary before-bedtime rounds of the house. I went to her little room and rapped on the door and opened it without waiting for an avanti. I probably had always assumed that servants did nothing at night except sleep to restore their energies for service the next day. But what was happening in that room that night was not sleep. It was something appalling and ludicrous and astounding to me--and educational.

Immediately before me on the bed was a pair of immense buttocks bouncing up and down. They were distinctive buttocks, being as purple-black as aubergines, and even more distinctive because they had a strip of cloth binding a large, pale-yellow onion in the cleft between them. At my sudden entrance, there was a squawk of dismay and the buttocks bounded out of the candlelight into a darker corner of the room. This revealed on the bed a contrastingly fish-white body--the naked Zulià, sprawled supine and splayed wide open. Her eyes were shut, so she had not noticed my arrival.

At the buttocks' abrupt withdrawal, she gave a wail of deprivation, but continued to move as if she were still being bounced upon. I had never seen my nena except in gowns of many layers and floor length, and of atrociously garish Slavic colors. And the woman's broad Slavic face was so very plain that I had never even tried to imagine her similarly broad body as it might look undressed. But now I took avid notice of everything so wantonly displayed before me, and one detail was so eminently noticeable that I could not restrain a blurted comment:

"Zia Zulià," I said wonderingly, "you have a bright red mole down there on your--"

Her meaty legs closed together with a slap, and her eyes flew open almost as audibly. She grabbed for the bed covers, but Michièl had taken those along in his leap, so she seized at the bed curtains. There was a moment of consternation and contortion, as she and the slave fumbled to swaddle themselves. Then there was a much longer moment of petrified embarrassment, during which I was stared at by four eyeballs almost as big and luminous as the onion had been. I congratulate myself that I was the first to regain composure. I smiled sweetly upon my nena and spoke, not the words of apology I had come to say, but the words of an arrant extortioner.

With smug assurance I said, "I will not go to school tomorrow, Zia Zulià," and I backed out of the room and closed the door.

4

BECAUSE I knew what I would be doing the next day, I was too restless with anticipation to sleep very well. I was up and dressed before any of the servants awoke, and I broke my fast with a bun and a gulp of wine as I went through the kitchen on my way out into the pearly morning. I hurried along the empty alleys and over the many bridges to that northside mud flat where some of the barge children were just emerging from their quarters. Considering what I had come to ask, I probably should have sought out Daniele, but I

went instead to Ubaldo and put my request to him.

"At this hour?" he said, mildly scandalized. "Margarita is likely still asleep, the pig. But I will see."

He ducked back inside the barge, and Doris, who had overheard us, said to me, "I do not think you ought to, Marco."

I was accustomed to her always commenting on everything that everybody did or said, and I did not always appreciate it, but I asked, "Why ought I not?"

"I do not want you to."

"That is no reason."

"Margarita is a fat pig." I could not deny that, and I did not, so she added, "Even I am better looking than Margarita."

Impolitely I laughed, but I was polite enough not to say that there was small choice between a fat pig and a scrawny kitten.

Doris kicked moodily at the mud where she stood, and then said in a rush of words, "Margarita will do it with you because she does not care what man or boy she does it with. But I would do it with you because I do care."

I looked at her with amused surprise, and perhaps I also looked at her for the first time with appraisal. Her maidenly blush was perceptible even through the dirt on her face, and so was her earnestness, and so was a dim prefiguring of prettiness. At any rate, her undirtied eyes were of a nice blue, and seemed extraordinarily large, though that was probably because her face was somewhat pinched by lifelong hunger.

"You will be a comely woman someday, Doris," I said, to make her feel better. "If you ever get washed--or at least scraped. And if you grow more of a figure than a broomstick. Margarita already is grown as ample as her mother."

Doris said acidly, "Actually she looks more like her father, since she also grew a mustache."

A head with frowzy hair and gummy eyelids poked out through one of the splintery holes in the barge hull, and Margarita called, "Well, come on then, before I put on my frock, so I do not have to take it off!"

I turned to go and Doris said, "Marco!" but when I turned back impatiently, she said, "No matter. Go and play the pig."

I clambered inside the dark, dank hull and crept along its rotting plank decking until I came to the hold partition where Margarita squatted on a pallet of reeds and rags. My groping hands encountered her before I saw her, and her bare body felt as sweaty and spongy as the barge's timbers. She immediately said, "Not even a feel until I get my bagatin."

I gave her the copper, and she lay back on the pallet. I got over her, in the position in which I had seen Michièl. Then I flinched, as there came a loud *wham!* from the outside of the barge hull, but just beside my ear, and then a *screech!* The boat boys were playing one of their favorite games. One of them had caught a cat--and that is no easy feat, although Venice does teem with cats--and had tied it to the barge side, and the boys were taking turns running and butting it with their heads, competing to see who would first mash it to death.

As my eyes adapted to the darkness, I noted that Margarita was indeed hairy. Her palely shining breasts seemed the only hairless part of her. In addition to the frowze on her head and the fuzz on her upper lip, she was shaggy of legs and arms, and a large plume of hair hung from either armpit. What with the darkness in the hold and the veritable bush on her artichoke, I could see considerably less of her female apparatus than I had seen of Zia Zulià's. (I could smell it, however, Margarita being no more given to bathing than were any of the boat people.) I knew that I was expected to insert myself somewhere down there, but ...

Wham! from the hull, and a yowl from the cat, further confounding me. In some perplexity, I began to feel about Margarita's nether regions.

"Why are you playing with my pota?" she demanded, using the most vulgar word for that orifice.

I laughed, no doubt shakily, and said, "I am trying to find the--er--your lumaghèta."

"Whatever for? That is of no use to you. Here is what you want." She reached down one hand to spread herself and the other to guide me in. It was easily done, she was so well reamed.

Wham! Squawl!

"Clumsy, you jerked it out again!" she said peevishly, and did some brisk rearranging.

I lay there for a moment, trying to ignore her piggishness and her aroma and the dismal surroundings, trying to enjoy the unfamiliar, warm, moist cavity in which I was loosely clasped.

"Well, get on with it," she whined. "I have not yet peed this morning."

I commenced to bounce as I had seen Michièl do, but, before I could get fairly started, the barge hold seemed to darken still more before my eyes. Though I tried to restrain and savor it, my spruzzo gushed unbidden and without any sensation of pleasure whatever.

Wham! Yee-oww!

"Oh, che braga! What a lot of it!" Malgarita said disgustedly. "My legs will be sticking together all day. All right, get off, you fool, so I can jump!"

"What?" I said groggily.

She wriggled out from under me, stood up, and took a jump backward. She jumped forward, then backward again, and the whole barge rocked. "Make me laugh!" she commanded, between jumps.

"What?" I said.

"Tell me a funny story! There, that was seven jumps. I said make me laugh, marcolfo! Or would you rather make a baby?"

"What?"

"Oh, never mind. I will sneeze instead." She grabbed a lock of her hair, stuck the frowzy ends of it up one of her nostrils, and sneezed explosively.

Wham! Rowr-rr-rrr ... The cat's complaint died off as, evidently, the cat died, too. I could hear the boys squabbling about what to do with the carcass. Ubaldo wanted to throw it in onto me and Malgarita, Daniele wanted to throw it in some Jew's shop door.

"I hope I have jarred it all out," said Malgarita, wiping at her thighs with one of her bed rags. She dropped the rag back on her pallet, moved to the opposite side of the hold, squatted down and began copiously to urinate. I waited, thinking that one of us ought to say something more. But finally I decided that her morning bladder was inexhaustible, and so crept out of the barge the way I had come in.

"Sana capàna!" shouted Ubaldo, as if I had just then joined the company. "How was it?"

I gave him the jaded smile of a man of the world. All the boys whooped and hooted good-naturedly, and Daniele called, "My sister is good, yes, but my mother is better!"

Doris was nowhere about, and I was glad I did not have to meet her eyes. I had made my first journey of discovery--a short foray toward manhood--but I was not disposed to preen myself on that accomplishment. I felt dirty and I was sure I smelled of Malgarita. I wished I had listened to Doris and not done it. If that was all there was to being a man, and doing it with a woman, well, I had done it. From now on, I was entitled to swagger as brashly as any of the other boys, and swagger I would. But I was privately determining, all over again, to be kind to Zia Zulià. I would not tease her about what I had found in her room, or despise her, or tell on her, or wrest concessions with the threat of telling. I was sorry for her. If I felt soiled and wretched after my experience with a mere boat girl, how much more miserable my nena must feel, having no one willing to do it with her but a contemptible black man.

However, I was to have no opportunity to demonstrate my noble-mindedness. I got home again to find all the other servants in a turmoil, because Zulià and Michièl had disappeared during the night.

The sbiri had already been called in by Maestro Attilio, and those police apes were making conjectures typical of them: that Michièl had forcibly abducted Zulià in his batèlo, or that the two of them had for some reason gone out in the boat in the night, overturned it, and drowned. So the sbiri were going to ask the fishermen on the seaward side of Venice to keep a close eye on their hooks and nets, and the peasants on the Vèneto mainland to keep a lookout for a black boatman conveying a captive white damsel. But then they thought to investigate the canal right outside the Ca' Polo, and there lay the batèlo innocently moored to its post, so the sbiri scratched their heads for new theories. In any event, if they could have caught Michièl even without the woman, they would have had the pleasure of executing him. A runaway slave is ipso facto a

thief, in that he steals his master's property: his own living self.

I kept silent about what I knew. I was convinced that Michièl and Zulià, alarmed by my discovery of their sordid connection, had eloped together. Anyway, they were never apprehended and never heard from again. So they must have made their way to some back corner of the world, like his native Nubia or her native Bohemia, where they could live squalidly ever after.

5

I was feeling so guilty, for so many different reasons, that I did something unprecedented for me. Of my own accord, not impelled by any authority, I betook myself to church to make my confession. I did not go to our confino's San Felice, for its old Pare Nunziata knew me as well as the local sbiri did, and I desired a more disinterested auditor. So I went all the way to the Basilica of San Marco. None of the priests there knew me, but the bones of my namesake saint lay there, and I hoped they would be sympathetic.

In that great vaulted nave, I felt like a bug, diminished by all the glowing gold and marble and the holy notables aloft and aloof in the ceiling mosaics. Everything in that most beautiful building is bigger than real life, including the sonorous music, which brays and bleats from a rigabèlo that seems too small to contain so much noise. San Marco's is always thronged, so I had to stand in line before one of the confessionals. Finally, I got in and got launched on my purgation: "Father, I have too freely followed where my curiosity has led me, and it has led me astray from the paths of virtue" I went on in that vein for some time, until the priest impatiently requested that I not regale him with *all* the circumstances preliminary to my misdemeanors. So, albeit reluctantly, I fell back on formula--"have sinned in thought and word and deed"--and the pare decreed some number of Paternosters and Avemarias, and I left the box to begin on them, and I got hit by lightning. I mean that almost literally, so vivid was the shock I felt when I first laid eyes on the Dona Ilaria. I did not then know her name, of course; I knew only that I was looking at the most beautiful woman I had yet seen in my life, and that my heart was hers. She was just then coming out of a confessional herself, so her veil was up. I could not believe that a lady of such radiant loveliness could have had anything more than trivial to confess, but, before she lowered her veil, I saw a sparkle as of tears in her glorious eyes. I heard a creak as the priest shut the slide in the box she had just quitted, and he too came out. He said something to the other supplicants waiting in line there, and they all mumbled grouchyly and dispersed to other lines. He joined the Dona Ilaria and both of them knelt in an empty pew.

In a sort of trance, I moved closer and slid into the pew across the aisle from them, and fixed my gaze sideways on them. Though they both kept their heads bent, I could see that the priest was a young man and handsome in an austere kind of way. You may not credit this, but I felt a twinge of jealousy that my lady--*my lady*--had not chosen a drier old stick to tell her troubles to. Both he and she, as I could tell even through her veil, were moving their lips prayerfully, but they were doing so alternately. I supposed he must be leading her in some litany. I might have been consumed with curiosity to know what she could have said in the confessional to require such intimate attention from her confessor, but I was too much occupied with devouring her beauty.

How do I describe her? When we view a monument or an edifice, any such work of art or architecture, we remark on this and that element of it. Either the combination of details makes it handsome, or some particular detail is so noteworthy as to redeem the whole from mediocrity. But the human face is never viewed as an accretion of details. It either strikes us immediately as beautiful in its entirety, or it does not. If we can say of a woman only that "she has nicely arched eyebrows," then clearly we had to look hard to see that, and the rest of her features are little worth remarking.

I can say that Ilaria had a fine and fair complexion and hair of a glowing auburn color, but many other Venetian women do, too. I can say that she had eyes so alive that they seemed to be lighted from within instead of reflecting the light without. That she had a chin one would want to cup in the palm of a hand. That she had what I have always thought of as "the Verona nose," because it is seen most often there--thin and pronounced, but shapely, like a sleek boat's fine prow, with the eyes deepset on either side.

I could praise her mouth especially. It was exquisitely shaped and gave promise of being soft if ever other lips should press upon it. But more than that. When Ilaria and the priest rose together after their orisons and

genuflected, she curtsied again to him and said some few words in a soft voice. I do not recall what they were, but let me suppose that they were these: "I will join you behind the chantry, Father, after the compline." I do recall that she concluded by saying "Ciao," because that is the languid Venetian way of saying *schiaivo*, "your slave," and I thought it an oddly familiar way of saying goodbye to a priest. But all that mattered then was the manner in which she spoke: "I will j-join you behind the ch-chantry, Father, after the compline. Ci-ciao." Each time she pouted her lips to form the *ch* or *j* sound, she stammered ever so slightly and thus prolonged the pout. It made her lips look ready and waiting for a kiss. It was delicious. I instantly forgot that I was supposed to be petitioning for absolution of other misdeeds, and tried to follow her when she left the church. She could not possibly have been aware of my existence, but she departed from San Marco's in a way that almost seemed intended to discourage pursuit. Moving more swiftly and adroitly than I could have done even if chased by a sbiro, she flickered through the crowd in the atrium and vanished from my sight. Marveling, I went all the long way around the basilica's outside, then up and down all the arcades surrounding the vast piazza. Mystified, I several times crisscrossed the piazza itself, through clouds of pigeons--then the smaller piazzetta, from the bell tower down to the two pillars at the waterfront. Despairing, I returned to the great church and looked in every last chapel and the sanctuary and the baptistery. Desolated, I even went up the stairs to the loggia where the golden horses stand. At last, heartbroken, I went home.

After a tormented night, I went again the next day to comb the church and its environs. I must have looked like a wandering soul seeking solace. And the woman might have been a wandering angel who had alighted only the once; she was not to be found. So I made my mournful way to the neighborhood of the boat people. The boys gave me a cheery salute, and Doris gave me a glance of disdain. When I responded with a forlorn sigh, Ubaldo was solicitous and asked what ailed me. I told him--I had lost my heart to a lady and then lost my lady--and all the children laughed, except Doris, who looked suddenly stricken.

"You have largazze on your mind these days," Ubaldo said. "Do you intend to be the cock of every hen in the world?"

"This is a full-grown woman, not a girl," I said. "And she is too sublime even to be thought of as ..."

"As a pota!" several of the boys chorused.

"Anyway," I said, in a bored drawl, "as regards the pota, all women are alike." Man of the world, I had now seen a grand total of two females in the nude.

"I do not know about that," one boy said ruminatively. "I once heard a much-traveled mariner tell how to recognize a woman of the most utterly desirable bedworthiness."

"Tell us! Tell!" came the chorus.

"When she stands upright, with her legs pressed together, there should be a little, a tiny little triangle of daylight between her thighs and her artichoke."

"Does your lady show daylight?" someone asked me.

"I have seen her the once, and that was in church! Do you suppose she was undressed in church?"

"Well, then, does Malgarita show daylight?"

I said, and so did several other boys, "I did not think to look."

Malgarita giggled, and giggled again when her brother said, "You could not have seen, anyway. Her bottom hangs down too far behind, and her belly in front."

"Let us look at Doris!" someone shouted. "Olà, Doris! Stand with your legs together and raise your skirt."

"Ask a real woman!" Malgarita sneered. "That one would not know whether to lay eggs or give milk."

Instead of lashing back with some retort, as I would have expected of her, Doris sobbed and ran away.

All the chaffering was amusing enough, and maybe even educational, but my concern was elsewhere. I said, "If I can find my lady again, and point her out to you fellows, perhaps you could manage to follow her better than I did, and tell me where she lives."

"No, grazie!" Ubaldo said firmly. "To molest a highborn lady is to gamble between the pillars."

Daniele snapped his fingers. "That reminds me. I heard that there is to be a frusta at the pillars this very afternoon. Some poor bastard who gambled and lost. Let us go and see it."

And so we did. A frusta is a public scourging and the pillars are those two I have mentioned, near the waterfront in Samarco's piazzetta. One of the columns is dedicated to my namesake saint and the other to Venice's earlier patron saint Teodoro, called Todaro here. All public punishments and executions of malefactors are carried out there--"between Marco and Todaro," as we say.

The centerpiece that day was a man we boys all knew, though we did not know his name. He was universally called only Il Zudio, which means either the Jew or the usurer, or more commonly both. He resided in the burghèto set aside for his race, but the narrow shop in which he changed money and lent money was on the Merceria, where we boys lately did most of our thieving, and we had often seen him huddled at his counting table. He had hair and beard like a sort of curly red fungus going gray; he wore on his long coat the round yellow patch proclaiming him a Jew and the red hat that proclaimed him a Western Jew.

There were numerous others of his race in the crowd that afternoon, most in red hats, but some in the yellow head-wrappings signifying their Levantine origin. They would probably not have come of their own will to see a fellow Jew whipped and humiliated, for which reason Venetian law makes it mandatory for all adult male Jews to attend on such occasions. Of course, the crowd consisted mostly of non-Jews, gathered just for the sport, and an unusually high proportion were female.

The zudio had been convicted of a fairly common offense--the gouging of excessive interest on some loan--but gossip had him guilty of more spicy intrigues. There was a widespread rumor that he, unlike any sensible Christian pawnbroker who dealt only in jewels and plate and other valuables, would take in pawn and lend good money for letters of mere paper, though they had to be letters of an indiscreet or compromising nature. Since so many Venetian women employed scribes to write for them letters of just that nature, or to read to them the letters of that nature which they received, perhaps the women wanted to look at the zudio and speculate on whether he held incriminating copies of their correspondence. Or maybe, as so many women so often do, they simply wished to see a man flogged.

The usurer was accompanied to the flogging post by several uniformed gastaldi guards and his assigned comforter, a member of the lay Brotherhood of Justice. The brother, to remain anonymous in that degrading capacity of comforter to a Jew, wore a full gown and a hood over his head with eyeholes cut in it. A pre-co of the Quarantia stood where I had stood on the day before--high above the crowd on San Marco's loggia of the four horses--and read in a ringing voice:

"Inasmuch as the convict Mordecai Cartafilo has behaved very cruelly, against the peace of the State and the honor of the Republic and the virtue of its citizens ... he is sentenced to endure thirteen vigorous strokes of the frusta, and thereafter to be confined in a pozzo of the Palace Prison while the Signori della Notte make inquiry of him into further particulars of his crimes"

The zudio, when by custom he was asked if he had any complaint to make of the judgment, merely growled uncaringly, "Nè tibi nè catabi." The wretch may have shrugged coolly enough before he felt the scourge, but he did other things during the next several minutes. First he grunted, then he cried out, and then he howled. I glanced around at the crowd--the Christians were all nodding approvingly and the Jews were trying to look elsewhere--and my glance stopped at a certain face, and locked there, and I began sidling through the pack of people to get nearer to my lost lady found.

There came a shriek from behind me, and Ubaldo's voice calling, "Olà, Marco, you are not listening to the music of the sinagoga!"

But I did not turn around. I was taking no chance of letting the woman slip from my sight this time. She was again unveiled, the better to watch the frusta, and again I feasted my eyes on her beauty. As I got closer I saw that she stood next to a tall man who wore a cloak with a hood closely drawn about his face; he was nearly as anonymous as the Brother of Justice at the flogging post. And when I stood very close I heard that man murmur to my lady, "Then it was you who spoke to the snout."

"The J-Jew deserved it," she said, the delicious pout lingering briefly on her lips.

He murmured, "A chicken before a tribunal of foxes."

She laughed lightly but without humor. "Would you have preferred that I let the ch-chicken go to the confessional, Father?"

I wondered if the lady was younger than she looked, that she addressed every man as father. But then I sneaked a look up into the man's hood, I being shorter than he was, and saw that it was the San Marco priest of the day before. Wondering why he should be going about with his vestments hidden, I listened some more, but their disjointed conversation gave me no hint.

He said, still in a murmurous voice, "You fixed on the wrong victim. The one who might talk, not the someone who might listen."

She laughed again and said archly, "You never speak the name of that someone."

"Then you speak it," he murmured. "To the snout. Give the foxes a goat instead of a chicken."

She shook her head. "That someone--that old goat--has friends among the foxes. I require a means even more secret than the snout."

He was silent for a time. Then he murmured, "Bravo."

I assumed that he was murmurously applauding the performance of the frusta, which, after one last loud and piercing screech, was just then ending. The crowd began to mill about in preparation for dispersal.

My lady said, "Yes, I will inquire into that possibility. But now"--she touched his cloaked arm--"that someone approaches."

He clasped the hood still closer about his face and moved off with the crowd, away from her. She was joined by another man, this one gray-haired, red-faced, dressed in clothes as fine as hers--perhaps her real father, I thought--who said, "Ah, there you are, Ilaria. How did we get separated?"

That was the first time I heard her name. She and the older man strolled off together, she chattering brightly about "how well the frusta was done, what a nice day for it," and other such typically feminine remarks. I hung far enough behind them not to be noticeable, but I followed as if I were being tugged on a string. I feared that they would walk only as far as the waterfront and there step into the man's batèlo or gòndola. In that case I should have had a hard time following them. Everyone in the crowd who did not have a private craft was competing for the boats for hire. But Ilaria and her companion turned the other way and walked up the piazzetta toward the main piazza, skirting the crowd by staying close to the wall of the Doge's Palace. Ilaria's rich robe flicked the very muzzles of the lionlike marble masks which protrude from the palace wall at waist level. Those are what we Venetians call the musci da denonzie secrete, and there is one of them for each of several sorts of crime: smuggling, tax evasion, usury, conspiracy against the State, and so on. The snouts have slits for mouths and on the other side of them, inside the palace, the agents of the Quarantia squat like spiders waiting for a web to twitch. They do not have to wait long between alarms. Those marble slits have been worn ever wider and smoother over the years, by the countless hands slipping into them unsigned messages imputing crimes to enemies, creditors, lovers, neighbors, blood relations and even total strangers. Because the accusers remain unknown and can accuse without proof, and because the law makes little allowance for malice, slander, frustration and spite, it is the accused who must disprove the accusations. That is not easy, and it is seldom done.

The man and woman circled around two sides of the arcaded square, with me close enough behind to overhear their desultory talk. Then they entered one of the houses there on the piazza itself, and, from the demeanor of the servant who opened the door, it was evident that they lived there. Those houses of the innermost heart of the city are not elaborately decorated on the outside, and so are not called palazzi. They are known as the "mute houses" because their outward simplicity says nothing about the wealth of their occupants, who comprise the oldest and noblest families of Venice. So I will be likewise mute about which house I followed Ilaria to, and not risk casting shame on that family name.

I learned two other things during that brief surveillance. From the bits of conversation, it became apparent even to my besotted self that the gray-haired man was not Ilaria's father but her husband. That caused me some hurt, but I salved it with the thought that a young woman with an old husband ought to be readily susceptible to the attentions of a younger man, like myself.

The other thing I overheard was their talk of the festa to be celebrated the next week, the Samarco dei Bòcoli. (I should have mentioned that the month was April, of which the twenty-fifth is the day of San Marco, and in Venice that day is always a feast of flowers and gaiety and masquerade dedicated to "San

Marco of the Buds." This city loves feste, and it welcomes that day because it comes around each year when there has been no festa since Carnevale, perhaps two months ago.)

The man and woman spoke of the costumes they were having made, and the several balls to which they had been invited, and I felt another heart pang because those festivities would be held behind doors closed to me. But then Ilaria declared that she was also going to mingle in the outdoor torchlight promenades of that night. Her husband made some remonstrance, grumbling about the crowds and the crush to be endured "among the common herd," but Ilaria laughingly insisted, and my heart beat with hope and resolve again.

Directly they disappeared inside their casa muta, I ran to a shop I knew near the Rialto. Its front was hung with masks of cloth and wood and cartapesta, red and black and white and face-colored, in forms grotesque and comic and demonic and lifelike. I burst into the shop, shouting to the maskmaker, "Make me a mask for the Samarco festa! Make me a mask that will make me look handsome but old! Make me look more than twenty! But make me look well preserved and manly and gallant!"

6

SO it was that, on the morning of that late-April festa day, I dressed in my best without having to be bidden to do so by any of the servants. I put on a cerise velvet doublet and lavender silk hose and my seldomworn red Còrdoba shoes, and over all a heavy wool cloak intended to disguise the slenderness of my figure. I hid my mask beneath the cloak, and left the house, and went to try my masquerade on the boat children. As I approached their barge, I took out and put on the mask. It had eyebrows and a dashing mustache made of real hair, and its face was the craggy, sun-browned visage of a mariner who had sailed far seas.

"Olà, Marco," said the boys. "Sana capàna."

"You *recognize* me? I look like *Marco*?"

"Hm. Now that you mention it ...," said Daniele. "No, not much like the Marco we know. Who do you think he looks like, Boldo?"

Impatient, I said, "I do not look like a seafarer more than twenty years old?"

"Well ...," said Ubaldo. "Sort of a *short* seafarer ..."

"Ship's food is sometimes scanty," Daniele said helpfully. "It could have stunted your growth."

I was much annoyed. When Doris emerged from the barge and immediately said, "Olà, Marco," I wheeled to snarl at her. But what I saw gave me pause.

She too appeared to be in masquerade in honor of the day. She had washed her formerly nondescript hair, revealing it to be of a nice straw-gold color. She had washed her face clean and powdered it attractively pale, as grown-up Venetian women do. She was also wearing womanly garb, a gown of brocade cut down and remade from one that had been my mother's. Doris spun around to make the skirts whirl, and said shyly, "Am I not as fine and beautiful as your lustrissima lady love, Marco?"

Ubaldo muttered something about "all these dwarf ladies and gentlemen," but I only stared through the eyes of my mask.

Doris persisted, "Will you not walk out with me, Marco, on this day of festa? ... What are you laughing at?"

"Your shoes."

"What?" she whispered, and her face fell.

"I laugh because no *lady* ever wore those awful wooden tofi."

She looked inexpressibly hurt, and retired again inside the barge. I loitered long enough for the boys to assure me--and make me half believe--that nobody would recognize me as a mere boy except those who already knew me to be a mere boy. Then I left them, and went to the piazza San Marco. It was far too early for any ordinary celebrants to be yet abroad, but the Dona Ilaria had not described her costume while I was eavesdropping. She might be as heavily disguised as I was, so to recognize her I had to be lurking outside her door when she departed for the first of her balls.

I might have attracted some unwelcome attention, idling about that one end of one arcade like a novice cutpurse of extreme stupidity, but fortunately I was not the only person in the piazza already strikingly attired. Under almost every arch, a costumed matacin or a montimbanco was setting up his platform and, long before there was really enough of a crowd to play to, they were displaying their talents. I was glad, for

they gave me something to look at besides the doorway of the casa muta.

The montimbanchi, swathed in robes like those of physicians or astrologers, but more extravagantly spangled with stars and moons and suns, did various conjuring tricks or cranked music from an *ordegnogorgia* to attract attention, and, when they had caught the eye of any passerby, began vociferously to hawk their simples--dried herbs and colored liquids and moon-milk mushrooms and the like. The *matacini*, even more resplendent in gaudy face paint and costumes of checks and diamonds and patches, had nothing to peddle but their agility. So they bounded up and down on their platforms, and onto and off them, doing energetic acrobatics and sword dances, and they contorted themselves into fantastic convolutions, and they juggled balls and oranges and each other, and then, when they paused to take breath, they passed their hats around for coins.

As the day went on, more entertainers came and took up stands in the piazza, also the sellers of *confèti* and sweets and refreshing drinks, and more commonfolk strolled through, too, though not yet wearing their own festa finery. Those would congregate about a platform and watch the tricks of a *montimbanco* or listen to a *castròn* singing *barcarole* to lute accompaniment, and then, as soon as the artist began passing his hat or peddling his wares, would move on to another platform. Many of those people ambled from one performer to another until they came to where I lurked in my mask and cloak, and they would stand stolidly and ogle me and expect me to do something entertaining. It was slightly distressing, as I could do nothing but sweat at them--the spring day had become most unseasonably warm--and try to look as if I were a servant posted there, waiting patiently for my master.

The day wore on and on interminably, and I wished fervently that I had worn a lighter cloak, and I wished I could kill every one of the million nasty pigeons in the piazza, and I was grateful for every new diversion that came along. The first citizens arriving in anything but everyday raiment were the *arti* guilds wearing their ceremonial clothes. The *arte* of physicians, barber-surgeons and apothecaries wore high conical hats and billowing robes. The guild of painters and illuminators wore garments that may have been of mere canvas, but were most fancifully gold-leafed and colored over. The *arte* of tanners, curriers and leatherworkers wore hide aprons with decorative designs not painted or sewn but branded onto them

When all the many guilds were assembled in the piazza, there came from his palace the Doge Ranieri Zeno, and, though his public costume was familiar enough to me and everybody else, it was sufficiently lavish for any festive day. He had the white *scufieta* on his head and the ermine cape over his golden gown, the train of which was carried by three servants clad in the ducal livery. Behind them emerged the retinue of Council and *Quarantia* and other nobles and officials, all likewise richly attired. And behind them came a band of musicians, but they held their lutes and pipes and *rebecs* silent while they moved with measured pace down to the waterfront. The Doge's forty-oared *buzino d'oro* was just gliding up against the mole, and the procession marched aboard. Not until the gleaming bark was well out upon the water did the musicians begin to play. They always wait like that, because they know how the music gains a special sweetness when it skips across the wavelets to us listeners on the land.

About the hour of *compieta* the twilight came down, and the *lampaderi* moved about the piazza, setting alight the torch baskets bracketed above the arches, and I was still hovering within sight of the Lady *Ilaria's* door. I felt as if I had been there all my life, and I was getting faint with hunger--for I had not even gone as far from it as a fruit peddler's stand--but I was prepared to wait all the rest of my life if that should be necessary. At least by that hour I was not so conspicuous, for the square was well populated, and almost all the promenaders were in some kind of costume.

Some of them danced to the distant music of the Doge's band, some sang along with the warbling *castròni*, but most simply paraded about to show off their own regalia and admire that of others. The young people pelted each other with *confèti*, which are the little sprinkles of sweets and the eggshells filled with perfumed waters. The older girls carried oranges and waited to catch a glimpse of some favorite gallant at whom they could throw one. That custom is supposed to commemorate the wedding-gift orange of Jupiter and Juno, and a young man can boast himself an especially favored Jupiter if his Juno throws the orange hard enough to give him a black eye or knock out a tooth.

Then, as the twilight deepened, there came in from the sea the caligo, the briny mist that so often envelops Venice by night, and I began to be glad for my woolen cloak. In that fog, the hanging torches changed from iron baskets of curly flames into soft-edged globes of light magically suspended in space. The people in the piazza became merely darker and more coherent blobs of mist moving through the mist, except when they passed between me and one of the blurs of torchlight. Then they radiated extravagant spokes and wedges of shadow that flickered like black swordblades slashing at the gray fog. Only when some stroller passed quite near me did he or she briefly become solid, then in the next moment dissolve again. Like something out of a dream, an angel would take substance: a girl of tinsel and gauze and laughing eyes, and she would melt into something out of a nightmare: a Satan with varnished red face and horns.

Suddenly the door behind me opened and the gray fog was gashed by bright lamplight. I turned and saw two shadows against the dazzle, and they resolved themselves into my lady and her husband. Truly, if I had not been posted at the door, I could not have recognized either of them. He was totally transformed into one of the standard characters of masquerade, the comic physician, Dotòr Balanzòn. But Ilaria was so much changed that I could not immediately determine into what she was changed. A white and gold miter concealed her bronze hair, a brief dòmino mask hid her eyes, and layers of alb, chasuble, cope and stole made a dumpy dome shape of her fine figure. Then I realized that she was adorned as the long-ago female Pope Zuàna. Her costume must have cost a fortune, and I feared that it would cost her a heavy penance if any real cleric caught her dressed as that legendary lady Pope.

They crossed the square through the porridge of people, and themselves immediately entered into the festa spirit: she scattering confèti in the manner of a priest aspersing holy water, and he tossing them in the manner of a mèdego dispensing dosages. Their gòndola was waiting at the lagoon-side, and they stepped into it, and it pushed off toward the Grand Canal. After a moment's thought, I did not bother to hail a boat in which to follow them. The caligo was by then so thick that all the vessels on the water were moving with extreme caution, close to the banks. It was easier for me to keep my quarry in sight, and to pursue it, by trotting along the canalside streets and occasionally waiting on a bridge to see which canal it would take when the waterways diverged. I did a good deal of trotting that night, as Ilaria and her consort went from one grand palazzo and casa muta to another. But I did a lot more of waiting outside those places, in the company of only prowling cats, while my lady enjoyed the feste within.

I lurked in the salt-smelling fog, which was now so heavy that it collected and dripped from eaves and arches and the end of my mask's nose, and I listened to the muffled music from indoors and I imagined Ilaria dancing the furlàna. I leaned against slippery, streaming stone walls and I enviously eyed the windowpanes where the candlelight glowed through the murk. I sat on cold, wet bridge balustrades and heard my stomach growling and envisioned Ilaria daintily nibbling at scalete pastries and bignè buns. I stood and stamped my gradually numbing feet, and I again cursed my cloak as it weighed ever more heavy and dank and cold and dragged at my ankles. Notwithstanding my sodden misery, I perked up and tried to look like an innocent merry-maker whenever other masqueraders loomed out of the caligo and shouted tipsy greetings at me--a cackling bufòn, a swaggering corsàro, three boys capering in company as the three Ms: mèdego, musician and madman.

The city does not sound the coprifuoco on feste nights, but, when we had arrived at the third or fourth palazzo of that night and I was waiting soggily outside it, I heard all the church bells ringing the compline. As if that had been a signal, Ilaria slipped away from the ballroom and came outdoors and came straight to where I crouched in an alcove of the house wall, my hood and cloak clasped close about me. She was still in her papal vestments, but she had taken off the dòmino.

She said softly, "Caro là," the greeting used only between lovers, and I was struck stiff as a statue. Her breath smelled sweetly of bevarìn hazelnut liqueur when she whispered to the folds of my hood, "The old goat is drunk at last, and will not be ch-chasing after--*Dio me varda! Who are you?*" And she shrank back from me. "My name is Marco Polo," I said. "I have been following--"

"I am discovered!" she cried, so shrilly that I feared a sbiro might hear. "You are his bravo!"

"No, no, my lady!" I stood up and threw back my hood. Since my seafarer mask had so affrighted her, I

slipped that off, too. "I am nobody's but yours only!"

She backed farther away, her eyes wide in disbelief. "You are a boy!"

I could not deny that, but I could qualify it. "Of a man's experience," I said quickly. "I have loved you and sought you since first I saw you."

Her eyes narrowed to examine me more closely. "What are you doing here?"

"I was waiting," I babbled, "to put my heart at your feet and my arm in your service and my destiny in your keeping."

She looked nervously about her. "I have page boys enough. I do not wish to hire--"

"Not for hire!" I declared. "For love of my lady I shall serve her forever!"

I may have hoped for a look of melting surrender. The look she gave me conveyed more of exasperation.

"But it is the hour of compline," she said. "Where is--? I mean, have you seen no one else hereabout? Are you alone?"

"No, he is not," said another voice, a very quiet one.

I turned about and realized that a sword's point had been very near the back of my neck. It was just then withdrawing into the fog, and it glinted a gleam of cold, bedewed steel as it vanished beneath the cloak of its wielder. I had thought the voice was that of Ilaria's priest acquaintance, but priests do not carry swords.

Before I or she could speak, the hooded figure murmured again:

"I see by your raiment tonight, my lady, that you are a mocker. So be it. Now is the mocker mocked. This young intruder desires to be a lady's bravo, and will serve for no hire but love. Let him, then, and let that be your penance for mockery."

Ilaria gasped and started to say, "Are you suggesting--?"

"I am absolving. You are already forgiven whatever must be done. And when the greater obstacle has been removed, a smaller one will be more easily dismissed."

With that, the shape in the fog moved farther back in the fog and blended into the fog and was gone. I had no idea what the stranger's words had meant, but I did perceive that he had spoken in my behalf, and I was grateful. I turned again to Ilaria, who was regarding me with a sort of rueful appraisal. She put one slim hand inside her robe and brought out the dòmino and raised it before her eyes as if to mask something there.

"Your name is ... Marco?" I bowed my head and mumbled that it was. "You said you followed me. You know my house?" I mumbled yes. "Come there tomorrow, Marco. To the servants' door. At the hour of mezza-vespro. Do not fail me."

7

I did not fail her, at least in the matter of promptness. The next afternoon, I presented myself as commanded, and the servants' door was opened by an ancient hag. The hag's little eyes were as mistrustful as if she knew every shameful thing about Venice, and she admitted me to the house as distastefully as if I had been one of the worst. She led me upstairs, along a hall, pointed a withered finger at a door, and left me. I knocked at the panel and the Dona Ilaria opened it. I stepped inside and she secured the latch behind me.

She bade me be seated, and then she walked up and down before my chair, regarding me speculatively. She wore a dress covered with gold-colored flakes that shimmered like a serpent's scales. It was a close-fitting dress and her walk was sinuous. The lady would have looked rather reptilian and dangerous, except that she kept wringing her hands the while, and thus betrayed her own uncertainty at our being alone together.

"I have been thinking about you ever since last night," she said. I started to echo that, wholeheartedly, but I could not make my voice work, and she went on. "You say you ch-choose to serve me, and there is indeed a service you could do. You say you would do it for love, and I confess that arouses my ... my curiosity. But I think you are aware that I have a husband."

I swallowed loudly and said yes, I was aware.

"He is much older than I, and he is embittered by age. He is j-jealous of my youth and envious of all things youthful. He also has a violent temper. Clearly I cannot enlist the service of a--of a young man--not to mention enjoy the love of one. You understand? I might wish to, even yearn to, but I cannot, being a married woman."

I gave that some thought, then cleared my throat and said what seemed to me obvious, "An old husband will die and you will still be young."

"You do understand!" She stopped wringing her hands and clapped them, applauding. "You are quick of intellect for such a--such a young man." She cocked her head, the better to look admiringly at me. "So he must die. Yes?"

Dejectedly I stood up to go, supposing that we had agreed that any yearned-for connection between us must simply wait until her bad-natured old husband was dead. I was not happy at that postponement, but, as Ilaria said, we both were young. We could restrain ourselves for a while.

Before I could turn to the door, though, she came and stood very close to me. She pressed herself against me, in fact, and looked down into my eyes and very softly inquired, "How will you do it?"

I gulped and said hoarsely, "How will I do what, my lady?"

She laughed a conspiratorial laugh. "You are discreet besides! But I think I will have to know, because it will require some prior planning to ensure that I am not However, that can wait. For now, pretend that I asked how you will--love me."

"With all my heart!" I said in a croak.

"Oh, with that, too, let us hope. But surely--do I shock you, Marco? --with some other part of you as well?"

She laughed merrily at what must have been the expression on my face.

I made a strangled noise and coughed and said, "I have been taught by an experienced teacher. When you are free and we can make love, I will know how to do that. I assure you, my lady, I will not make a fool of myself."

She lifted her eyebrows and said, "Well! I have been wooed with promises of many different delights, but never quite that one." She studied me again, through eyelashes that were like talons reaching for my heart. "Show me, then, how you do not make a fool of yourself. I owe you at least an earnest payment for your service."

Ilaria raised her hands to her shoulders and somehow unfastened the top of her gold-serpent gown. It slipped down to her waist, and she undid the bustenca underneath, and let that drop to the floor, and I was gazing upon her breasts of milk and roses. I think I must have tried simultaneously to grab for her and to peel off my own clothes, for she gave a small shriek.

"Who was it taught you, boy? A goat? Come to the bed."

I tried to temper my boyish eagerness with manly decorum, but that was even more difficult when we were on the bed and both of us were totally unclad. Ilaria's body was mine to savor in every inviting detail, and even a stronger man than myself might have wished to abandon all restraint. Tinted of milk and roses, fragrant of milk and roses, soft as milk and roses, her flesh was so beautifully different from the gross meat of Malgarita and Zulià that she might have been a woman of a new and superior race. It was all I could do to keep from nibbling her to see if she tasted as delectable as she looked and smelled and felt to the touch.

I told her that, and she smiled and stretched languorously and closed her eyes and suggested, "Nibble, then, but g-gently. Do to me *all* the interesting things you have learned."

I ran one tremulous finger along the length of her--from the fringe of closed eyelashes down her shapely Verona nose, across the pouted lips, down her chin and her satin throat, over the mound of one firm breast and its pert nipple, down her smoothly rounded belly to the feathering of fine hair below--and she squirmed and mewed with pleasure. I remembered something that made me halt my tracing finger there. To demonstrate that I knew very well how to do things, I told her with suave assurance, "I will not play with your pota, in case you have to pee."

Her whole body jerked and her eyes flew open and she exploded, "*Amoredèi!*" and she flailed angrily out from under my hand and well away from me.

She knelt at the far edge of the bed and stared as if I were something that had just emerged from a crack in the floor. After vibrating at me for a moment, she demanded, "Who *was* it taught you, asenazzo?"

I, the ass, mumbled, "A girl of the boat people."

"Dio v'agiuta," she sighed. "Better a goat."

She lay down again, but on her side, with her head propped on a hand so she could go on staring at me. "Now I really am curious," she said. "Since I do not have to--excuse myself--what do you do next?" "Well," I said, disconcerted. "I put my. You know, my candle. Into your uh. And move it. Back and forth. And, well, that is it." A wondering and terrible silence ensued, until I said uncomfortably, "Is it not?" "Do you truly believe that is all there is to it? A melody on one string?" She shook her head in slow marveling. I began miserably to collect myself. "No, do not go away. Do not move. Stay where you are and let me teach you properly. Now, to begin with ..."

I was surprised, but pleasantly so, to learn that making love should be rather like making music, and that "to begin with," both players should commence the playing so far away from their main instruments--instead, using lips and eyelashes and earlobes--and that the music could be so enjoyable even in its pianissimo beginning. The music swelled to vivace when Ilaria introduced for instruments her full breasts and softly rigid nipples, and teased and coaxed me into using my tongue instead of fingers to pluck the notes from them. At that pizzicato, she literally gave voice and sang in accompaniment to the music. In a brief interval between those choruses, she informed me, in a voice gone whispery, "You have now heard the hymn of the convent."

I also learned that a woman really does possess such a thing as the lumaghèta of which I had heard, and that the word is correct in both its meanings. The lumaghèta is indeed a thing somewhat resembling a small snail, but in function it is more like the tuning key that a luteist employs. When Ilaria showed me, by doing it first herself, how to manipulate the lumaghèta delicately and adroitly, I could make her, like a veritable lute herself, hum and twang and ring delightfully. She taught me how to do other things, too, which she could not do to herself, and which would never have occurred to my imagination. So at one moment I would be twiddling with my fingers as on the frets of a viella, and the next I would be using my lips in the manner of playing a dulzaina, and the next I would be flutter-tonguing in the way a flutist blows his flute.

It was not until well along in that afternoon's divertimento that Ilaria gave the cue for us to join our main instruments, and we played all'unisono, and the music rose in crescendo to an unbelievable climax of tutti fortissimi. Then we kept on bringing it back up to that peak, again and again, during most of the rest of the afternoon. Then we played several codas, each a little more diminuendo, until we were both fairly drained of music. Then we lay quietly side by side, enjoying the waning tremolo after-echoes ... dolce, dolce ... dolce ... When some time had passed, I thought to make gallant inquiry: "Do you not want to jump around and sneeze?"

She gave a slight start, looked sideways at me, and muttered something I could not hear. Then she said, "No, grazie, I do not, Marco. I wish now to talk of my husband."

"Why darken the day?" I objected. "Let us rest a little longer and then see if we cannot play another tune."

"Oh, no! As long as I remain a married woman, I shall remain a ch-chaste one. We do not do this again until my husband is dead."

I had acquiesced when she earlier set that condition. But now I had sampled the ecstasy that awaited, and the thought of waiting was insupportable. I said, "Even though he is old, that might take years."

She gave me a look and said sharply, "Why should it? What means do you propose using?"

Bewildered, I said, "I?"

"Did you intend j-just to go on following him, as you did last night? Until perhaps you annoy him to death?" The truth finally began to filter through my density. I said in awe, "Do you seriously mean he is to be killed?"

"I mean he is to be killed seriously," she said, with flat sarcasm. "What did you think we have been talking about, asenazzo, when we talked of your doing me a service?"

"I thought you meant ... this." And I shyly touched her there.

"No more of that." She wriggled a little away from me. "And by the way, if you must use vulgar language, try at least to call that my mona. It sounds a *little* less awful than that other word."

"But am I never to touch your mona again?" I said wretchedly. "Not until I do that other service for you?"

"To the victor the spoils. I have enjoyed polishing your stilèto, Marco, but another bravo might offer me a

sword."

"A bravo," I reflected. "Yes, such a deed would make me a real bravo, would it not?"

She said persuasively, "And I would much rather love a dashing bravo than a furtive despoiler of other men's wives."

"There is a sword in a closet at home," I muttered to myself. "It must have belonged to my father or one of his brothers. It is old, but it is kept honed and bright."

"You will never be blamed or even suspected. My husband must have many enemies, for what important man has not? And they will be of his own age and standing. No one would think to suspect a mere--I mean a younger man who has no discernible motive for taking his life. You have only to accost him in the dark, when he is alone, and make sure of your strike so he does not linger long enough to give any description--"

"No," I interrupted her. "Better if I could find him among a gathering of his peers, those who include his actual enemies. If in those circumstances I could do it unobserved ... But no." I suddenly realized that I was contemplating murder. I concluded lamely, "That would probably be impossible."

"Not for a g-genuine bravo," Ilaria said, in the voice of a dove. "Not for one who will be rewarded so bounteously."

She moved against me again, and continued to move, tantalizing with the promise of that reward. This aroused in me several conflicting emotions, but my body recognized only one of them and raised a baton to play a fanfare of salute.

"No," said Ilaria, fending me off and becoming very businesslike. "A music maistra may give the first lesson free, to indicate what can be learned. But if you wish further lessons in more advanced execution, you must earn them."

She was clever, to send me away not completely satiated. As it was, I left the house--again by the servants' door--throbbing almost painfully and lusting as if I had not been satisfied at all. I was being led and directed, so to speak, by that baton of mine, and its inclination was to lead me back to Ilaria's bower, whatever that might require of me. Other events seemed also to be conspiring toward that end. When I came around from the back of the block of houses, I found the Samarco piazza full of people in a buzzing commotion, and a uniformed banditore was crying the news:

The Doge Ranieri Zeno had been stricken by a sudden seizure that afternoon in his palace chambers. The Doge was dead. The Council was being summoned to start voting for a successor to the ducal crown. The whole of Venice was bidden to observe a three-day period of mourning before the funeral of the Doge Zeno. Well, I thought as I went on my way, if a great Doge can die, why cannot a lesser noble? And, it occurred to me, the funeral ceremonies would entail more than one assemblage of those lesser nobles all together. Among them would be my lady's husband and undoubtedly, as she had suggested, some of his enviers and enemies.

8

FOR the next three days, the late Doge Zeno lay in state in his palace, being visited by respectful citizens during the days and being watched over by the professional vigil-keeper during the nights. I spent most of that time in my room, practicing with the old but still worthy sword until I became quite adept at slashing and stabbing phantom husbands. What I had the most trouble with was simply carrying the sword about, because it was nearly as long as my leg. I could not just slip it naked under my belt or else, when I walked, I might impale my own foot. To carry the thing anywhere, I should have to carry it in its scabbard, and that made it even more unwieldy. Also, for concealment of it, I should have to wear my all-enveloping long cloak, which would not permit any quick draw-and-lunge.

Meanwhile, I made cunning plans. On the second day of vigil, I wrote a note, most carefully drawing the characters in my schoolboy hand: "Will he be at both the Funeral and the Installation?" I regarded that critically, then underscored the *he* so that there should be no mistaking whom I meant. I painstakingly drew my name underneath, so that there should be no mistaking the note's author. Then I did not entrust it to any servant, but carried it myself to the casa muta, and waited for another interminable time until I saw the *he* leave the house, dressed in dark mourning clothes. I went around to the back door, gave the note to the old

hag doorkeeper, and told her I would wait for a reply.

After another while, she returned. She bore no reply but beckoned me with a gnarled finger. Again I followed her to Ilaria's suite of rooms, and found my lady studying the paper. She looked flustered, somehow, and neglected to give me any fond greeting, saying only, "I can read, ofcourse, but I cannot make out your wretched writing. Read this to me."

I did, and she said yes, her husband, like every other member of the Venetian Grand Council, would be attending both the funeral rites for the late Doge and the installation ceremonies of the new one when he had been selected. "Why do you ask?"

"It gives me two opportunities," I said. "I shall try to--accomplish my service--on the funeral day. If that proves impossible, I will at least have a better idea of how to go about it at the next gathering of nobles." She took the paper from me and looked at it. "I do not see my name on this."

"Naturally not," I said, the experienced conspirator. "I would not compromise a *lustrissima*."

"Is your name on it?"

"Yes." I pointed with pride. "There. That is my name, my lady."

"I have learned that it is not always wise to commit things to paper." She folded and tucked the paper into her bodice. "I will keep this safe." I started to tell her just to tear it up, but she went on, sounding peevish, "I hope you realize that you were very foolish to come here unbidden."

"I waited to make certain *he* left."

"But if someone else--if one of his relatives or friends was here? Listen to me now. You are never to come here again until I summon you."

I smiled. "Until we are free of--"

"*Until I summon you*. Now go, and go quickly. I am expecting--I mean, he may come back any minute."

So I went home and practiced some more. And the next day, when at sundown the *pompe funebri* began, I was among the spectators. Even the least commoner's burial in Venice is always dignified by as much pageantry as his or her family can afford, so the Doge's was splendid indeed. The dead man lay not in a coffin but on an open litter, dressed in his finest robes of state, his stiff hands clasping his mace of office, his face fixed by the pomp-masters in an expression of serene sanctimony. The widowed Dogaressa stayed always beside it, so draped in veils that only her white hand was visible where it rested on her late husband's shoulder.

The litter was first laid on the roof of the Doge's great *buzino d'oro*, at the prow of which the gold-and-scarlet ducal flag hung at half staff. The bark was rowed with solemn slowness--the forty oars seeming scarcely to move--up and down the main canals of the city. Behind it and around it were grouped black funeral *gòndole* and crape-hung *batèli* and *burchielli*, bearing the members of the Council and the Signoria and the Quarantia and the city's chief priests and the *confratèli* of the *arti* guilds, the whole retinue alternately singing hymns and chanting prayers.

When the dead man had been sufficiently paraded on the waterways, his litter was lifted off the bark and onto the shoulders of eight of his nobles. Because the *corteggio* then had to wind up and down all the main streets of the central city, and because so many of the pallbearers were elderly, they changed places frequently with new men. And the litter was again followed by the Dogaressa and all the other court mourners, now on foot, and by bands of musicians playing doleful slow music, and contingents from the flagellant brotherhoods lethargically pretending to whip themselves, and finally by every other Venetian not too young or old or crippled to walk.

I could do nothing during the water-borne procession except watch it from the banks with the rest of the citizens. But by the time it came ashore, I decided that good fortune was attending my scheme. For there also came in from the water the twilight *caligo* again, and the obsequies became even more melancholy and mysterious, shrouded by fog, the music muffled and the chants lugubriously hollow.

Bracket torches were lighted along the route, and most of the marchers took out and lighted candles. For a while I walked among the common herd--or limped, rather, since the sword along my left leg forced me to swing it stimy--and gradually eased myself to the forefront of that throng. From there I could verify that

almost every official mourner was cloaked and hooded, except the priests. So was I well covered, and in the thick mist I could be taken for one of the guilds' artists or artisans. Even my size was not conspicuous; the procession included numerous veiled women no bigger than I was, and a few cowed dwarfs and hunchbacks smaller than I was. So I edged my way imperceptibly among the court mourners, and ever farther forward, being challenged by nobody at all, until I was separated from the litter and its pallbearers only by a rank of priests yammering their ritual *pimpirimpàra* and swinging censers to add smoke to the fog.

I was not the only inconspicuous marcher in the procession. What with everybody being so shrouded in cloth and in the almost equally woolly mist, I had a hard time picking out my quarry. But the street march was long enough that, by moving cautiously from side to side and peering sharply at the little of each man's profile that protruded beyond his cowl, I at last was able to perceive which was Ilaria's husband, and thereafter I kept my eye on him.

My chance came when the corteggio finally debouched from a narrow street onto the cobbled embankment of the city's north shore--on the Dead Lagoon, not far from where the boat children's barge lay, though that was invisible in the fog and the now near-dark. Alongside the embankment was the Doge's bark, which had circled the city to get ahead of us, waiting to ferry him on his last voyage--to the Isle of the Dead, also invisible far offshore. There was a milling of the mourners, as all the men nearest the litter tried to help its bearers hoist it aboard the bark, and that gave me the opportunity to mingle in with them. I elbowed until I was right beside my quarry, and in all the shoving and bustling no one remarked the struggle I had to make to unsheathe my sword. Fortunately, Ilaria's husband did not manage to get his shoulder under the litter--or the dispatching of him might have meant the Doge's getting dropped into the Dead Lagoon.

What did get dropped was my heavy scabbard; somehow my fumbling had unhooked it from my tunic belt. It clattered heavily onto the cobblestones and kept on noisily proclaiming itself as the many shuffling feet kicked it about. My heart bounded into my throat and then almost popped out of my mouth as Ilaria's husband bent down to pick up the scabbard. But he made no outcry; he handed it back to me with the kindly comment, "Here, young fellow, you dropped this." I was still right next to the man, and both of us were still being buffeted by the movement of the crowd around us, and my sword was in my hand beneath my cloak, and that was the moment to strike, but how could I? He had saved me from immediate discovery; could I stab him in return for the favor?

But then another voice spoke, hissing beside my ear, "You stupid asenazzo!" and something else made a rasping noise, and something metallic glinted in the torchlight. It happened at the edge of my vision, so my impressions were fragmentary and confused. But it appeared to me that one of the priests who had been swinging a golden censer had abruptly swung something silvery instead. And then Ilaria's husband leaned into my view, and opened his mouth and belched a substance that looked black in that light. I had done nothing to him, but *something* had happened to him. He tottered and jostled against the other men in the bunched group, and he and at least two others fell down. Then a heavy hand clutched at my shoulder, but I yanked away from it, and the recoil took me out of the center of the tumult. As I struggled through the outer fringe of people, and caromed off a couple of them, I again dropped my scabbard and then the sword as well, but I did not pause. I was in panic and I could think of nothing but to run fast and far. Behind me I heard exclamations of astonishment and outrage, but by then I was well away from the massed torch and candlelight and well away into the blessed darkness and fog.

I kept on running along the embankment until I saw two new figures taking form before me in the misty night. I might have shied away, but I saw they were children's figures and, after a moment, they resolved themselves into Ubaldo and Doris Tagiabue. I was ever so relieved to see someone familiar--and small. I tried to put on a glad face and probably put on a ghastly one, but I hailed them jollily:

"Doris, you are still scrubbed and clean!"

"You are not," she said, and pointed.

I looked down at myself. The front of my cloak was wet with more than a soaking of caligo. It was splotted and spattered with glistening red.

"And your face is as pale as a tombstone," said Ubaldo. "What happened, Marco?"

"I was ... I was almost a bravo," I said, my voice gone suddenly unsteady. They stared at me, and I explained. It felt good to tell it to somebody unconcerned in the matter. "My lady sent me to slay a man. But I think he died before I could do it. Some other enemy must have intervened, or hired a bravo to do it."

Ubaldo exclaimed, "You *think* he died?"

"Everything happened all at once. I had to flee. I suppose I will not know what really happened until the banditori of the night watch cry the news."

"Where was this?"

"Back yonder, where the dead Doge is being put aboard his bark. Or maybe he is not yet. All is turmoil."

"I could go and see. I can tell you sooner than a banditore."

"Yes," I said. "But be careful, Boldo. They will be suspecting every stranger."

He ran off the way I had come, and Doris and I sat down on a waterside bollard. She regarded me gravely, and after a while said, "The man was the lady's husband." She did not frame it as a question, but I nodded numbly. "And you hope to take his place."

"I already have," I said, with as much of boastfulness as I could muster. Doris seemed to wince, so I added truthfully, "Once, anyway."

That one afternoon now seemed long in the past, and at the moment I felt no arousal of the urge to repeat it. Curious, I thought to myself, how anxiety can so diminish a man's ardor. Why, if I were in Ilaria's room right now, and she was naked and smiling and beckoning, I could not ...

"You may be in terrible trouble," said Doris, as if to shrivel my ardor utterly.

"I think not," I said, to convince myself rather than the girl. "I did nothing more criminal than to be where I did not belong. And I got away without being caught or recognized, so no one knows I did even that much. Except you, now."

"And what happens next?"

"If the man is dead, my lady will soon summon me to her grateful embrace. I will go slightly shamefaced, for I had hoped to go to her as a gallant bravo, the slayer of her oppressor." A thought came to me. "But now at least I can go to her with a clear conscience." The thought brought a little cheer with it.

"And if he is not dead?"

The cheer evaporated. I had not yet considered that eventuality. I said nothing, and sat trying to think what I might do--or might have to do.

"Perhaps then," Doris ventured in a very small voice, "you might take me instead of her for your smanza?"

I ground my teeth. "Why do you keep on making that ridiculous proposal? Especially now, when I have so many other problems to think about?"

"If you had accepted when I first offered, you would not now have so many problems."

That was either female or juvenile illogic, and palpably absurd, but there was just enough truth in it to make me respond with cruelty, "The Dona Ilaria is beautiful; you are not. She is a woman; you are a child. She merits the Dona to her name, and I also am of the Ene Aca. I could never take for my lady anyone not nobly born and--"

"She has not behaved very nobly. Neither have you."

But I careered on, "She is always clean and fragrant; you have only just discovered washing. She knows how to make love sublimely; you will never know more than the pig Malgarita--"

"If your lady knows how to *fottere* so well, then you must have learned, too, and you could teach me--"

"There you are! No lady would use a word like *fottere*! Ilaria calls it *musicare*."

"Then teach me to talk like a lady. Teach me to *musicare* like a lady."

"This is insupportable! With everything else on my mind, why am I sitting here arguing with an imbecile?" I stood up and said sternly, "Doris, you are supposed to be a good girl. Why do you keep offering not to be?"

"Because ..." She bowed her head so that her fair hair fell like a casque around her face and hid her expression. "Because that is all I can offer."

"Olà, Marco!" called Ubaldo, solidifying out of the fog and coming up to us, panting from his run.

"What did you find out?"

"Let me tell you one thing, zenzo. Be glad you are *not* the bravo who did that."

"Who did what, exactly?" I asked apprehensively.

"Killed the man. The man you spoke of. Yes, he is dead. They have the sword that did it."

"They do not!" I protested. "The sword they have must be mine, and there is no blood on it."

Ubaldo shrugged. "They found a weapon. They will assuredly find a sassin. They will have to find somebody to blame, because of who it was he assassinated."

"Only Ilaria's husband--"

"The next Doge."

"What?"

"The same man. But for this, the banditori would have been proclaiming him Doge of Venice tomorrow.

Sacro! That is what I overheard, and I heard it several times repeated. The Council had elected him to succeed the Serenità Zeno, and were only waiting until after the pompe funebri to make the announcement."

"Oh, Dio mio!" I would have said, but Doris said it for me.

"Now they must start the voting all over again. But not before they find the bravo who is guilty. This is not just another back-alley knifing. From the way they were talking, this is something that has never before occurred in the history of the Republic."

"Dio mio," Doris breathed again, then asked me, "What will you do now?"

After some thought, if my mind's perturbation could be called thinking, I said, "Perhaps I ought not go to my house. Can I sleep in a corner of your barge?"

9

SO that is where I passed the night, on a pallet of smelly rags--but not in sleep; in staring, glaring wakefulness. When, at some small hour, Doris heard my restless tossing and came creeping to ask if I would like to be held and soothed, I simply snarled, and she crept away again. She and Ubaldo and all the other boat children were asleep when the dawn began to poke its fingers through the many cracks in the old barge hull, and I got up, leaving my blood-stained cloak, and slipped out into the morning.

The city was all fresh pink and amber in color, and every stone sparkled with dew left by the caligo. By contrast, I felt anything but sparkly, and an over-all drab brown in color, even to the inside of my mouth. I wandered aimlessly through the awakening streets, the turnings of my path determined by my veering away from every other person out walking that early. But gradually the streets began to fill with people, too many for me to avoid them all, and I heard the bells ringing the terza, the start of the working day. So I let myself drift lagoonward, to the Riva Ca' de Dio and into the warehouse of the Compagnia Polo. I think I had some dim notion of asking the clerk Isidoro Priuli if he could quickly and quietly arrange for me the berth of cabin boy on some outbound vessel.

I trudged into his little counting room, so sunk in my morosity that it took me a moment to notice that the room was more than usually cramped and that Maestro Doro was saying to a crowd of visitors, "I can only tell you that he has not set foot in Venice in more than twenty years. I repeat, the Messer Marco Polo has long lived in Constantinople and still lives there. If you refuse to believe me, here is his nephew of the same name, who can vouch--"

I spun on my heel to go out again, having recognized the crowd in the room as no more than two, but extremely burly, uniformed gastaldi of the Quarantia. Before I could escape, one of them growled, "Same name, eh? And look at the guilty face on him!" and the other reached out to clamp a massive hand around my upper arm.

Well, I was marched away, while the clerk and the warehouse men goggled. We had no great distance to go, but it seemed the longest of all the journeys I have ever made. I struggled feebly in the iron grip of the gastaldi and, more like a bimbo than a bravo, pleaded tearfully to know of what I was accused, but the stolid bailiffs never replied. As we tramped along the Riva, through crowds of passersby also goggling, my mind was a tumult of questions: Was there a reward? Who turned me in? Did Doris or Ubaldo somehow send word? We crossed over the Bridge of the Straw, but did not continue as far as the piazzetta entrance to the Doge's Palace. At the Gate of the Wheat, we turned in to the Torresella, which stands adjacent to the palace

and is the last remainder of what was in ancient times a fortified castle. It is now officially the State Prison of Venice, but its inmates have another name for it. The prison is called by the name our ancestors called the fiery pit before Christianity taught them to call it Hell. The prison is called Vulcano.

From the bright pink and amber morning outside, I found myself suddenly thrust into an orbà, which might not sound like much unless you know that it means "blinded." An orbà is a cell just big enough to contain one man. It is a stone box, totally unfurnished and absolutely without any opening for light or air. I stood in a darkness unrelieved, suffocatingly close, foul with stench. The floor was thick with some gluey mess that sucked at my feet when I moved them, so I did not even try to sit down, and the walls were spongy with some slime that seemed to crawl when I touched it, so I did not even lean; when I tired of standing, I squatted. And I shook with an ague as I slowly comprehended the full horror of where I was and what had become of me. I, Marco Polo, son of the Ene Aca house of Polo, bearer of a name inscribed in the Libro d'Oro--so recently a free man, a carefree youth, free to wander where I would in the whole wide world--I was in *prison*, disgraced, despised, shut up in a box that no rat would willingly inhabit. Oh, how I wept! I do not know how long I stayed in that blind cell. It was at least the remainder of that day, and it may have been two or three days, for, although I tried hard to control my fright-churned bowels, I several times contributed to the mess on the floor. When finally a guard came to let me out, I assumed I had been freed as innocent, and I exulted. Even had I been guilty of killing the Doge-elect, I was sure I had suffered punishment enough for it, and had felt enough remorse and sworn enough repentance. But of course my exultation was dashed when the guard told me that I had endured only the first and probably least of my punishments--that the orbà is only the temporary cell where a prisoner is held until time for his preliminary examination.

So I was brought before the tribunal called the Gentlemen of the Night. In an upstairs room of the Vulcano, I was stood in front of a long table behind which sat eight grave and elderly men in black gowns. I was not positioned too close to their table, and the guard on either side of me did not stand too close to me, for I must have smelled as terrible as I felt. If I also looked as terrible, I must have appeared the very portrait of a low and brutish criminal.

The Signori della Notte began by taking turns at asking me some innocuous questions: my name, my age, my residence, particulars of my family history and the like. Then one of them, referring to a paper before him, told me, "Many other questions must be asked before we can determine on a bill of indictment. But that interrogation will be postponed until you have been assigned a Brother of Justice to act as your advocate, for you have been denounced as the perpetrator of a crime which is capitally punishable"

Denounced! I was so stunned that I missed most of the man's subsequent words. The denouncer had to be either Doris or Ubaldo, for only they knew that I had even been near the murdered man. But how could either of them have done it so quickly? And who did they get to write for them the denunciation to be slid into one of the snouts?

The gentleman concluded his speech by asking, "Have you any comment to make on these most serious charges?"

I cleared my throat and said hesitantly, "Who--who denounced me, Messere?" It was an inane thing to ask, since I could not reasonably expect an answer, but it was the question uppermost in my mind. And much to my surprise, the examiner did answer:

"You denounced yourself, young Messere." I must have blinked at him stupidly, for he added, "Did you not write this?" and read from a piece of paper: "Will *he* be at both the Funeral and the Installation?" I am sure I blinked at him stupidly, for he added, "It is signed Marco Polo."

Walking like a sleepwalker, I was taken by my guards down the stairs again, and then down another flight of stairs into what they called the wells, the deepest part of the Vulcano. Even that, they told me, was not the real dungeon of the prison; I could look forward, when I had been properly convicted, to being shifted into the Dark Gardens reserved for the keeping of condemned men until their execution. Laughing coarsely, they opened a thick but only knee-high wooden door in the stone wall, pushed me down and shoved me through it, and gave the door a slam like the knell of Doomsday.

This cell was at least considerably larger than the orbà and had at least a hole in the low door. The hole was too small to permit me to shake a fist through it at the departing jailers, but it did admit a trace of air and enough light to keep the cell from being utterly dark. When my eyes had adjusted to the murk, I could see that the cell was furnished with a lidded pail for a pissòta and two bare plank shelves for beds. I could see nothing else except what looked like a tumbled heap of bedclothes in one corner. However, when I approached it, the heap heaved and stood up and was a man.

"Salamelèch," he said hoarsely. The greeting sounded foreign. I squinted at him and recognized the red-gray, fungoid hair and beard. It was the zudio whose public scourging I had witnessed on a day memorable for much else.

10

"MORDECAI," he introduced himself. "Mordecai Cartafilo." And he asked the question that all prisoners ask each other at first meeting: "What are you in for?"

"Murder," I said with a snuffle. "And I think treason and lesa-maestà and a few other things."

"Murder will suffice," he said drily. "Not to worry, lad. They will overlook those trifling other items. You cannot be punished for themonce you have been punished for murder. That would be what is called double jeopardy, and that is forbidden by the law of the land."

I gave him a sour look. "You are jesting, old man."

He shrugged. "One lightens the dark as best one can."

We sat gloomy in the gloom for a while. Then I said, "You are in here for usury, are you not?"

"I am not. I am in here because a certain lady *accused* me of usury."

"That is a coincidence. I am also in here--at least indirectly--because of a lady."

"Well, I only said lady to indicate the gender. She is really"--he spat on the floor--"a shèquesa kàrove."

"I do not understand your foreign words."

"A gentile putana cagna," he said, as if still spitting. "She begged a loan from me and pledged some love letters as security. When she could not pay, and I would not return the letters, she made sure I would not deliver them to anyone else."

I shook my head sympathetically. "Yours is a sad case, but mine is more ironic. My lady begged a service from me and pledged herself as reward. The deed was done, but not by me. Nevertheless, here I am, rather differently rewarded, but my lady probably does not even know of it yet. Is that not ironic?"

"Hilarious."

"Yes, Ilaria! Do you know the lady?"

"What?" He glared at me. "Your kàrove is named Ilaria, too?"

I glared at him. "How dare you call my lady a putana cagna?"

Then we ceased glaring at each other, and we sat down on the bed shelves and began comparing experiences, and alas, it became evident that we had both known the same Dona Ilaria. I told old Cartafilo my whole adventure, concluding:

"But you mentioned love letters. I never sent her any."

He said, "I am sorry to be the one to tell you. They were not signed with your name."

"Then she was in love with someone else all the time?"

"So it would seem."

I muttered, "She seduced me only so I would play the bravo for her. I have been nothing but a dupe. I have been exceptionally stupid."

"So it would seem."

"And the one message that I did sign--the one the Signori now have--she must have slipped it into the snout. But why should she do that to me?"

"She has no further use for her bravo. Her husband is dead, her lover is available, you are but an encumbrance to be shed."

"But I did not kill her husband!"

"So who did? Probably the lover. Do you expect her to denounce him, when she can offer you up instead and

thereby keep him safe?" I had no answer to that. After a moment he asked, "Did you ever hear of the lamia?" "Lamia? It means a witch."

"Not exactly. The lamia can take the form of a very young witch, and very beautiful. She does that to entice young men to fall in love with her. When she has snared one, she makes love to him so voluptuously and industriously that he gets quite exhausted. And when he is limp and helpless, she eats him alive. It is only a myth, of course, but a curiously pervasive and persistent myth. I have encountered it in every country I have visited around the Mediterranean Sea. And I have traveled much. It is strange, how so many different peoples believe in the bloodthirstiness of beauty."

I considered that, and said, "She did smile while she watched you flogged, old man."

"I am not surprised. She will probably reach the very height of venereal excitement when she watches you go to the Meatmaker."

"To the what?"

"That is what we old prison veterans call the executioner--the Meatmaker."

I cried, distraught, "But I cannot be executed! I am innocent! I am of the Ene Aca! I should not even be shut up with a Jew!"

"Oh, excuse me, your lordship. It is that the bad light in here has dimmed my eyesight. I took you for a common prisoner in the pozzi of the Vulcano."

"I am not *common!*"

"Excuse me again," he said, and reached a hand across the space between our bed shelves. He plucked something off my tunic and regarded it closely. "Only a flea. A common flea." He popped it between his fingernails. "It appeared as common as my own."

I grumbled, "There is nothing wrong with your eyesight."

"If you really are a noble, young Marco, you must do what all the noble prisoners do. Agitate for a better cell, a private one, with a window over the street or the water. Then you can let down a string, and send messages, or haul up delicacies of food. That is not supposed to be allowed, but in the case of nobility the rules are winked at."

"You make it sound as if I will be here a long time."

"No." He sighed. "Probably not long."

The import of that remark made my hair prickle. "I keep telling you, old fool. *I am innocent!*"

And that made him reply, just as loudly and indignantly, "Why tell me, unhappy mamzar? Tell it to the Signori della Notte! I am innocent, too, but here I sit and here I will rot!"

"Wait! I have an idea," I said. "We are both here because of the Lady Ilaria's wiles and lies. If together we tell that to the Signori, they ought to wonder about her veracity."

Mordecai shook his head doubtfully. "Whom would they believe? She is the widow of an almost Doge. You are an accused murderer and I am a convicted usurer."

"You may be right," I said, dispirited. "It is unfortunate that you are a Jew."

He fixed me with a not at all dim eye and said, "People are forever telling me that. Why do you?"

"Oh ... only that the testimony of a Jew is naturally suspect."

"So I have frequently noticed. I wonder why."

"Well ... you did kill our Lord Jesus"

He snorted and said, "I, indeed!" As if disgusted with me, he turned his back and stretched out on his shelf and drew his voluminous robe about him. He muttered to the wall, "I only spoke to the man ... only two words ..." and then apparently went to sleep.

When a long and dismal time had passed, and the door hole had darkened, the door was noisily unlocked and two guards crawled in dragging a large vat. Old Cartafilo stopped snoring and sat up eagerly. The guards gave him and me each a wooden shingle, onto which they spooned from the vat a lukewarm, glutinous glob. Then they left for us a feeble lamp, a bowl of fish oil in which a scrap of rag burned with much smoke and little light, and they went away and slammed the door. I looked dubiously at the food.

"Polenta gruel," Mordecai told me, avidly scooping his up with two fingers. "A holòsh, but you had better eat

it. Only meal of the day. You will get nothing else."

"I am not hungry," I said. "You may have mine."

He almost snatched it, and ate both portions with much lip smacking. When he had done, he sat and sucked his teeth as if unwilling to miss a particle, and peered at me from under his fungus eyebrows, and finally said:

"What would you ordinarily be eating for supper?"

"Oh ... perhaps a platter of tagiadèle with persuto ... and a zabagion to drink ..."

"Bongusto," he said sardonically. "I cannot pretend to tempt such a refined taste, but perhaps you would like some of these." He rummaged inside his robe. "The tolerant Venetian laws allow me some religious observance, even in prison." I could not see how that accounted for the square white crackers he brought out and handed to me. But I ate them gratefully, though they were almost tasteless, and I thanked him.

By the next day's suppertime, I was hungry enough not to be fastidious. I would probably have eaten the prison gruel just because it meant a break in the monotony of doing nothing but sitting, and sleeping on the coverless hard bench, and walking the two or three steps the cell permitted, and occasionally making conversation with Cartafilo. But that is how the days went on, each of them marked off only by the lightening and darkening of the door hole, and the old zudio's praying three times a day, and the evening arrival of the horrid food.

Perhaps it was not such a dreadful experience for Mordecai, since, to the best of my knowledge, he had spent all of his prior days huddled in his cell-like money shop on the Merceria, and this could not be a much different confinement. But I had been free and untrammelled and convivial; being immured in the Vulcano was like being buried alive. I realized that I ought to be grateful for having some company in my untimely grave, even if it was only a Jew, and even if his conversation was not always buoyant. One day I mentioned to him that I had seen several sorts of punishment administered at the pillars of Marco and Todaro, but never an execution.

He said, "That is because most of them are done here inside the walls, so that not even the other prisoners are aware of them until they are over. The condemned man is put into one of the cells of the Giardini Foschi, so called, and those cells have barred windows. The Meatmaker waits outside the cell, and waits patiently, until the man inside, moving about, moves before that window and with his back to it. Then the Meatmaker whips a garrotta through the bars and around the man's throat, so that either his neck snaps or he strangles to death. The Dark Gardens are on the canal side of this building, and there is a removable stone slab in the corridor there. In the night, the victim's body is slid through that secret hole and into a waiting boat, and it is conveyed to the Sepoltura Pubblica. Not until it is all finished is the execution announced. Far less fuss that way. Venice does not care to have it widely known that the old Roman lege de tagion is still so often exercised here. So the *public* executions are few. They are inflicted only on those convicted of really heinous crimes."

"Crimes like what?" I asked.

"In my time, one man has died so for having raped a nun, and another for having told a foreigner some of the secrets of the Murano art of glassworking. I daresay the murder of a Doge-elect will rank with those, if that is what you are wondering."

I swallowed. "What is--how is it done--in public?"

"The culprit kneels between the pillars and is beheaded by the Meatmaker. But before that, the Meatmaker has cut off whatever part of him was guilty of the crime. The nun raper, of course, had his gid amputated. The glassworker had his tongue cut out. And the condemned man marches to the pillars with the guilty piece of him suspended from a string around his neck. In your case, I suppose it will be only your hand."

"And only my head," I said thickly.

"Try not to laugh," said Mordecai.

"Laugh?!" I cried in anguish--and then I did laugh, his Words were so preposterous. "You are jesting again, old man."

He shrugged. "One does what one can."

One day, the monotony of my confinement was interrupted. The door was unlocked to let a stranger come stooping in. He was a fairly young man who wore not a uniform but the gown of the Brotherhood of Justice, and he introduced himself to me as Fratello Ugo.

"Already," he said briskly, "you owe a considerable casermagio of room and board in this State Prison. If you are poor, you are entitled to the assistance of the Brotherhood. It will pay your casermagio for as long as you are incarcerated. I am a licensed advocate, and I will represent you to the best of my ability. I will also carry messages to and from the outside, and procure some few small comforts--salt for your meals, oil for your lamp, things like that. I can also arrange for you"--he glanced over at old Cartafilo and sniffed slightly--"a private cell."

I said, "I doubt that I would be any less unhappy elsewhere, Fra Ugo. I will stay in this one."

"As you wish," he said. "Now, I have been in communication with the house of Polo, of which it seems you are the titular head, albeit still a minor. If you prefer, you can well afford to pay the prison casermagio, and also to hire an advocate of your own choice. You have only to write out the necessary pagheri and authorize the company to pay them."

I said uncertainly, "That would be a public humiliation to the company. And I do not know if I have any right to squander the company's funds"

"On a lost cause," he finished for me, nodding in agreement. "I quite understand."

Alarmed, I started to remonstrate, "I did not mean--that is, I would hope"

"The alternative is to accept the help of the Brotherhood of Justice. For its reimbursement, the Brotherhood is then allowed to send upon the streets two beggars, asking alms of the citizens for pity of the wretched Marco P--"

"Amoredèi!" I exclaimed. "That would be infinitely more humiliating!"

"You do not have to decide your choice this instant. Let us discuss your case instead. How do you intend to plead?"

"Plead?" I said, indignant. "I shall not plead, I shall protest! I am innocent!"

Brother Ugo looked over at the Jew again, and distastefully, as if he suspected that I had already been receiving counsel. Mordecai only pulled a face of skeptical amusement.

I went on, "For my first witness I shall call the Dona Ilaria. When she is compelled to tell of our--"

"She will not be called," the Brother interrupted. "The Signori della Notte would not allow it. That lady has been recently bereaved and is still prostrate with grief."

I scoffed, "Are you trying to tell me that she grieves for her husband?"

"Well ...," he said, with deliberation. "If not that, you can be sure that she exhibits some extreme emotion because she is not now the Dogaressa of Venice."

Old Cartafilo made a noise like a smothered snicker. Maybe I made a noise, too--of dismay--for that aspect of the situation had not before occurred to me. Ilaria must be seething with disappointment and frustration and anger. When she sought her husband's removal, she had not dreamed of the honor he was about to be accorded, and she with him. So now she would be inclined to forget her own involvement; she would be consumed with a desire to exact revenge for her forfeited title. It would not matter on *whom* she vented her rage, and who was an easier target than myself?

"If you are innocent, young Messer Marco," said Ugo, "who did murder the man?"

I said, "I think it was a priest."

Brother Ugo gave me a long look, then rapped on the cell door for a guard to let him out. As the door creaked open at his knee level, he said to me, "I suggest that you do choose to hire some other advocate. If you intend to accuse a reverend father, and your prime witness is a woman bent on vendèta, you will need the best legal talent there is in the Republic. Ciao."

When he had gone, I said to Mordecai, "Everyone takes it for granted that I am doomed, whether I am guilty *or not*. Surely there must be some law to safeguard the innocent against unjust conviction."

"Oh, almost surely. But there is an old saying: the laws of Venice are supremely fair and they are sedulously obeyed ... for a week. Do not let your hopes get too high."

"I would have more hope if I had more help," I said. "And you could help us both. Let the Brother Ugo have those letters you hold, and let him show them in evidence. They would at least cast a shadow of suspicion on the lady and her lover."

He gazed at me with his blackberry eyes and scratched reflectively in his fungus beard, and said, "You think that would be the Christian thing to do?"

"Why ... yes. To save my life, to set you free. I see nothing *un-Christian* about it."

"Then I am sorry that I adhere to a different morality, for I cannot do it. I did not do that to save myself from the frusta, and I will not do it for both of us."

I stared, unbelieving. "Why in the world not?"

"My trade is founded on trust. I am the only moneylender who takes such documents in pawn. I can do that only if I trust my clients to repay their loans and the accrued interest. The clients pledge such papers only because they can trust me to keep their contents inviolable. Do you think women would otherwise hand over *love letters*?"

"But I told you, old man, no human being trusts a Jew. Look how the Lady Ilaria repaid you with treachery. Is that not proof enough that she thought you untrustworthy?"

"It is proof of something, yes," he said wryly. "But if even once I should fail my trust, even on the most dire provocation, I must abandon my chosen trade. Not because others would think me contemptible, but because I would."

"What trade, you old fool? You may be in here the rest of your life! You said so yourself. You cannot conduct any--"

"I can conduct myself according to my conscience. It may be small comfort, but it is my only comfort. To sit here and scratch my flea and bedbug bites, and see my once prosperously fat flesh shrinking gaunt, and feel myself superior to the Christian morality that put me here."

I snarled, "You could preen yourself just as well *outside*--"

"Zito! Enough! The instruction of fools is folly. We will not speak of it further. Look here on the floor, my boy, here are two large spiders. Let us race them against each other and wager incalculable fortunes on the outcome. You may choose which spider will be yours"

11

MORE time passed, in dismalness, and then Brother Ugo came again, stooping in through the low door. I waited glumly for him to say something as disheartening as he had the other time, but what he said was astounding:

"Your father and his brother have returned to Venice!"

"What?" I gasped, unable to comprehend. "You mean their bodies have been returned? For burial in their native land?"

"I mean they are here! Alive and well!"

"Alive? After almost ten years of silence?"

"Yes! All their acquaintances are as amazed as you are. The entire community of merchants is talking of nothing else. It is said that they bear an embassy from Far Tartary to the Pope at Rome. But by good fortune--*your* fortune, young Messer Marco--they came home to Venice before going to Rome."

"Why my good fortune?" I said shakily.

"Could they have come at a more opportune time? They are even now petitioning the Quarantia for permission to visit you, which is not normally allowed to anyone but a prisoner's advocate. It may just be that your father and uncle can influence some lenity in your case. If nothing else, their presence at your trial ought to give you some moral support. And some stiffness to your spine when you walk to the pillars."

On that equivocal note, he departed again. Mordecai and I sat talking with animated speculation far into the night, even after the copri fuoco had rung and a guard growled through the door hole for us to extinguish the dim light of our rag lamp.

Another four or five days had to pass, fretful ones for me, but then the door creaked open and a man came in, a man so burly he had to struggle through it. Inside the cell he stood up, and he seemed to keep on standing

up, so tall was he. I had no least recollection of being related to a man so immense. He was as hairy as he was big, with tousled black locks and a bristling blue-black beard. He looked down at me from his intimidating great height, and his voice was disdainful when he boomed loudly:

"Well! If this is not pure merda with a piecrust on it!"

I said meekly, "Benvegnùo, caro pare."

"I am not your dear father, young toad! I am your uncle Mafio."

"Benvegnùo, caro zio. Is not my father coming?"

"No. We could get permission for only one visitor. And he should rightly be secluded in mourning for your mother."

"Oh. Yes."

"In truth, however, he is busy courting his next wife."

That rocked me on my heels. "What? How could he do such a thing?"

"Who are you to sound disapproving, you disreputable scagaròn? The poor man comes back from abroad to find his wife long buried, her maid-servant disappeared, a valuable slave lost, his friend the Doge dead--and his son, the hope of the family, in prison charged with the foulest murder in Venetian history!" So loudly that everybody in the Vulcano must have heard, he bellowed, "Tell me the truth! Did you do the deed?"

"No, my lord uncle," I said, quailing. "But what has all that to do with a new wife?"

My uncle said more quietly, with a snort of deprecation, "Your father is an uxorious man. For some reason, he likes being married."

"He chose an odd way to demonstrate it to my mother," I said. "Going away and staying as he did."

"And he will be going away again," said Uncle Mafio. "That is why he must have someone with good sense to leave in charge of the family interests. He has not time to wait for another son. Another wife will have to do."

"Why another anything?" I said hotly. "He *has* a son!"

My uncle did not reply to that with words. He merely looked me up and down, with scathing eyes, and then let his gaze roam around the constricted, dim, fetid cell.

Again abashed, I said, "I had hoped he could get me out of here."

"No, you must get yourself out," said my uncle, and my heart sank. But he continued to look about the room and said, as if thinking aloud, "Of all the kinds of disaster that can befall a city, Venice has always most feared the risk of a great fire. It would be especially fearsome if it threatened the Doge's Palace and the civic treasures contained in it, or the Basilica of San Marco and its even more irreplaceable treasures. Since that palace is next door to this prison on one side, and that church adjoining on the other side, the guards here in the Vulcano used to take particular precautions--I imagine they do still--that any smallest lamp flame in these cells is carefully monitored."

"Why, yes, they--"

"Shut up. They do that because if in the nighttime such a lamp were to set fire to, say, these wooden bed planks, there would be urgent outcry and much running about with pails of water. A prisoner would have to be let out of his burning cell so the fire could be extinguished. And then, if, in the smoke and turmoil, that prisoner could get as far as the corridor of the Giardini Foschi on the canal side of the prison, he might think to slide away the moveable stone panel in the wall there, which leads to the outside. And if he contrived to do that, say, tomorrow night, he would probably find a batèlo idling about on the water immediately below." Mafio finally brought his eyes around to me again. I was too busy contemplating the possibilities to say anything, but old Mordecai spoke up unbidden:

"That has been done before. And because of that, there is now a law that any prisoner attempting such an arson--no matter how trivial his original offense--will be himself condemned to burn. And from that sentence there is no appeal."

Uncle Mafio said sardonically, "Thank you, Matusalem." To me he said, "Well, you have just heard one more good reason to make not a try but a success of it." He kicked at the door to summon the guard. "Until tomorrow night, nephew."

I lay awake most of that night. It was not that the escape required much planning; I simply lay awake to enjoy the prospect of being free again. And old Cartafilo roused up suddenly out of an apparently sound sleep to say:

"I hope your family know what they are doing. Another law is that a prisoner's closest relation is responsible for his behavior. A father for a son--khas vesholem--a husband for a female prisoner, a master for a slave. If a prisoner does escape by arson, that one responsible for him will be burned instead."

"My uncle does not appear to be a man much concerned about laws," I said, rather proudly, "or even much afraid of burning. But Mordecai, I cannot do it without your participation. We must make the break together. What say you?"

He was silent for a while, then he mumbled, "I daresay burning is preferable to a slow death from the pettechie, the prison disease. And I long ago outlived every last one of my relations."

So the next night came, and when the coprifuoco tolled and the guards commanded us to put out our lamp, we only shaded its light with the pissòta pail. When the guards had gone on by, I spilled most of the fish oil from the lamp onto my bed planks. Mordecai contributed his outer robe--it was quite green with mold and mildew and would make the blaze smokier--and we bundled that under my bed and lighted it from the lamp's rag wick. In just moments the cell was clouded black and the wood had begun to flicker with flames.

Mordecai and I fanned our arms to help the smoke out through the door hole, and clamored loudly, "Fuoco! Al fuoco!" and heard running feet in the corridor.

Then, as my uncle had predicted, there was commotion and confusion, and Mordecai and I were ordered out of the cell so the men with water buckets could crawl in. Smoke billowed out with us, and the guards shoved us out of their way. There was quite a number of them in the passage, but they paid us little heed. So, aided by the concealing smoke and darkness, we sneaked farther down the corridor and around a bend in it. "Now this way!" said Mordecai, and he set off at a speed remarkable for a man of his age. He had been in the prison long enough to have learned its passages, and he led me this way and that, until we glimpsed light at the end of one long hall. He stopped there at a corner, peered around it and waved me on. We turned into a shorter corridor furnished with two or three wall lamps, but otherwise empty.

Mordecai knelt, motioned for me to help, and I saw that one large square stone in the bottom of the wall had iron grips bolted to it. Mordecai seized one, I the other, and we heaved and the stone came away, revealing itself to be shallower than the others around it. Wonderfully fresh air, damp and smelling of salt, swept in through the opening. I stood up straight to take a gratefully deep inhalation, and in the next instant I was knocked down. A guard had sprung from somewhere and was shouting for help.

There was a moment of even more confusion than before. The guard threw himself upon me and we thrashed about on the stone floor, while Mordecai crouched by the hole and regarded us with open mouth and wide eyes. I found myself briefly on top of the guard, and took advantage of it. I knelt so that he had my full weight on his chest and my knees pinned his arms to the floor. I clamped both hands over his loudly flapping mouth, turned to Mordecai and gasped, "I cannot hold--for long."

"Here, lad," he said. "Let me do that."

"No. One can escape. You go." I heard more running feet somewhere in the corridors. "Hurry!"

Mordecai stuck his feet out through the hole, then turned to ask, "Why me?"

Between grapplings and thrashings, I got out a few last words in spurts, "You gave--my choice--of spiders. Get out!"

Mordecai gave me a wondering look, and he said slowly, "The reward of a mitzva is another mitzva," and he slid out through the opening and vanished. I heard a distant splash out there beyond the dark hole, and then I was overwhelmed.

I was roughly manhandled along the passages and literally thrown into a new cell. I mean another very ancient cell, of course, but a different one. It had only a bed shelf for furniture, and no door hole and not so much as a candle stub for light. I sat there in the darkness, my bruises aching, and reviewed my situation. In attempting the escape, I had forfeited all hope of ever proving my innocence of the earlier charge. In failing to escape, I had doomed myself to burn. I had just one reason to be thankful: I now had a private cell. I had

no cellmate to watch me weep.

Since the guards, for a considerable while thereafter, spitefully refrained from feeding me even the awful prison gruel, and the darkness and monotony were unrelieved, I have no idea how long I was alone in the cell before a visitor was admitted. It was the Brother of Justice again.

I said, "I assume that my uncle's permission to visit has been revoked."

"I doubt that he would willingly come," said Brother Ugo. "I understand he became quite irate and profane when he saw that the nephew he hauled from the water had turned into an elderly Jew."

"And, since there is no further need for your advocacy," I said resignedly, "I assume you have come only in the guise of prisoner's comforter."

"At any rate, I bring news you should find comforting. The Council this morning elected a new Doge."

"Ah, yes. They were postponing the election until they had the sassìn of Doge Zeno. And they have me. Why should you think I find that comforting?"

"Perhaps you forget that your father and uncle are members of that Council. And since their miraculous return from their long absence, they are quite the most popular members of the community of merchants. Therefore, in the election, they could exert noticeable influence on the votes of all the merchant nobles. A man named Lorenzo Tiepolo was eager to become Doge, and in return for the merchants' bloc of votes, he was prepared to make certain commitments to your father and uncle."

"Such as what?" I asked, not daring to hope.

"It is traditional that a new Doge, on his accession, proclaims some amnesties. The Serenità Tiepolo is going to forgive your felonious commission of arson, which permitted the escape of one Mordecai Cartafilo from this prison."

"So I do not burn as an arsonist," I said. "I merely lose my hand and my head as a murderer."

"No, you do not. You are right that the sassìn has been captured, but you are wrong about its being you. Another man has confessed to the sassinàda."

Fortunately the cell was small or I should have fallen down. But I only reeled and slumped against the wall. The Brother went on, at an infuriatingly slow pace. "I told you I brought news of comfort. You have more advocates than you know, and they have all been busy in your behalf. That zudìo you freed, he did not just keep on running, or take ship to some distant land. He did not even hide in the warrens of the Jews' burghèto. Instead, he went to visit a priest--not a rabino, a real Christian priest--one of the under-priests of the San Marco Basilica itself."

I said, "I tried to tell you about that priest."

"Well, it seems the priest had been the Lady Ilaria's secret lover, but she turned bitter toward him when she so nearly became our Dogaressa and then did not. When she put away the priest from her affections, he became remorseful of having done such a vile deed as murder, and to no profitable end. Of course, he might still have kept silent, and kept the matter between himself and God. But then Mordecai Cartafilo called on him. It seems the Jew spoke of some papers he holds in pawn. He did not even show them, he had only to mention them, and that was enough to turn the priest's secret remorse into open repentance. He went to his superiors and made full confession, waiving the privilege of the confessional. So he is now under house arrest in his canònica chambers. The Dona Ilaria is also confined to her house, as an accomplice in the crime."

"What happens next?"

"All must await the new Doge's taking office. Lorenzo Tiepolo will not wish the very start of his Dogato made notorious, for this case now involves rather more prominent persons than just a boy playing bravo. The lady widow of the murdered Doge-elect, a priest of San Marco ... well, the Doge Tiepolo will do everything possible to minify the scandal. He will probably allow the priest to be tried in camera by an ecclesiastical court, instead of the Quarantia. My guess is that the priest will be exiled to some remote parish in the Vèneto mainland. And the Doge will probably command the Lady Ilaria to take the veil in some remote nunnery. There is precedent for such procedure. A hundred or so years ago, in France, there was a similar situation involving a priest and a lady."

"And what happens to me?"

"As soon as the Doge dons the white scufieta, he proclaims his amnesties, and yours will be among them. You will be pardoned of the arson, and you have already been acquitted of the sassinàda. You will be released from prison."

"Free!" I breathed.

"Well, perhaps a trifle more free than you might wish."

"What?"

"I said the Doge will arrange that this whole sordid affair be soon forgotten. If he simply turned you loose in Venice, you would be an ever present reminder of it. Your amnesty is conditional upon your banishment. You are outcast. You are to leave Venice forever."

During the subsequent days that I remained in the cell, I reflected on all that had come to pass. It was hurtful to think of leaving Venice, la serenissima, la clarissima. But that was better than dying in the piazzetta or staying in the Vulcano, which provided neither serenity nor brightness. I could even feel sorry for the priest who had struck the bravo's blow in my stead. As a young curate in the Basilica, he had doubtless looked forward to high advancement in the Church, which he could never hope for in backwoods exile. And Ilaria would endure an even more pitiable exile, her beauty and talents to be forever useless to her now. But maybe not; she had managed to lavish them rather prodigally when she was a married woman; she might also manage to enjoy them as a bride of Christ. She would at least have ample opportunity to sing the hymn of the nuns, as she had called it. All in all, compared to our victim's irrevocable fate, we three had got off lightly. I was released from the prison even less ceremoniously than I had been bundled into it. The guards unlocked my cell door, led me along the corridors and down stairs and through other doors, unloccking the final one to let me out into the courtyard. There I had only to walk through the Gate of the Wheat onto the sunlit lagoonside Riva, and I was as free as the countless wheeling sea gulls. It was a good feeling, but I would have felt even better if I had been able to clean myself and don fresh raiment before emerging. I had been unwashed and clad in the same clothes all this time, and I stank of fish oil, smoke and pissòta effluvium. My garments were torn, from my struggle on the night of the aborted escape, and what was left of them was dirty and rumpled. Also, in those days I was just sprouting my first down of beard; it may not have been very visible, but it added to my feeling of scruffiness. I could have wished for better circumstances in which to meet my father for the first time in my memory. He and my uncle Mafio were waiting on the Riva, both dressed in the elegant robes they had probably worn, as members of the Council, at the new Doge's accession.

"Behold your son!" bellowed my uncle. "Your arcistupendonazzìsimoson! Behold the namesake of our brother and our patron saint! Is this not a wretched and puny meschìn, to have caused so much ado?"

"Father?" I said timorously to the other man.

"My boy?" he said, almost as hesitantly, but opening his arms.

I had expected someone even more overwhelming than my uncle, since my father was the elder of the two. But he was actually pale alongside his brother; not nearly so big and burly, and much softer of voice. Like my uncle, he wore a journeyer's beard, but his was neatly trimmed. His beard and hair were not of a fearsome raven black, but a decorous mouse color, like my own hair.

"My son. My poor orphan boy," said my father. He embraced me, but quickly put me away at arm's length, and said worriedly, "Do you always smell like that?"

"No, Father. I have been locked up for--"

"You forget, Nico, that this is a bravo and a bonvivàn and a gambler between the pillars," boomed my uncle.

"A champion of ill-married matrons, a lurker in the night, a wielder of the sword, a liberator of Jews!"

"Ah, well," said my father indulgently. "A chick must stretch his wings farther than the nest. Come, let us go home."

12

THE house servants were all moving with more alacrity and more cheerful demeanor than they had shown since my mother died. They even seemed glad to see me home again. The maid hastened to heat water when

I asked, and Maestro Attilio, at my polite request, lent me his razor. I bathed several times over, inexpertly scraped the fuzz off my face, dressed in clean tunic and hose, and joined my father and uncle in the main room, where the tile stove was.

"Now," I said, "I want to hear about your travels. All about everywhere you have been."

"Dear God, not again," Uncle Mafio groaned. "We have been let talk of nothing else."

"Time enough for that later, Marco," said my father. "All things in their time. Let us speak now of your own adventures."

"They are over now," I said hastily. "I would rather hear of new things."

But they would not relent. So I told them, fully and frankly, everything that had happened since my first glimpse of Ilaria in San Marco's--only omitting the amatory afternoon she and I had spent together. Thus I made it seem that mere mooncalf chivalry had impelled me to make my calamitous try at bravura.

When I was done, my father sighed. "Any woman could give pointers to the devil. Ah, well, you did what seemed best to you. And he who does all he can, does much. But the consequences have been tragicindeed. I had to agree to the Doge's stipulation that you leave Venice, my son. He could, however, have been much harder on you."

"I know," I said contritely. "Where shall I go, Father? Should I go seeking a Land of Cockaigne?"

"Mafio and I have business in Rome. You will go with us."

"Do I spend the rest of my life in Rome, then? The sentence was banishment forever."

My uncle said what old Mordecai had said, "The laws of Venice are obeyed ... for a week. A Doge's forever is a Doge's lifetime. When Tiepolo dies, his successor will hardly prevent your returning. Still, that could be a good while from now."

My father said, "Your uncle and I are bearing to Rome a letter from the Khakhan of Kithai--"

I had never heard either of those harsh-sounding words before, and I interrupted to say so.

"The Khan of All Khans of the Mongols," my father explained. "You may have heard him titled the Great Khan of what is here miscalled Cathay."

I stared at him. "You met the Mongols? And you survived?"

"Met and made friends among them. The most powerful friend possible--the Khan Kubilai, who rules the world's widest empire. He asked us to carry a request to Pope Clement"

He went on explaining, but I was not hearing. I was still staring at him in awe and admiration, and thinking--this was my father, whom I had believed long dead, and this very ordinary-looking man claimed to be a confidant of barbarian Khans and holy Popes!

He concluded, " ... And then, if the Pope lends us the hundred priests requested by Kubilai, we will lead them east. We will go again to Kithai."

"When do we depart for Rome?" I asked.

My father said bashfully, "Well ..."

"After your father marries your new mother," said my uncle. "And that must wait for the proclamation of the bandi."

"Oh, I think not, Mafio," said my father. "Since Fiordelisa and I are hardly youngsters, both of us widowed, Pare Nunziata will probably dispense with all three cryings of the bandi."

"Who is Fiordelisa?" I asked. "And is this not rather abrupt, Father?"

"You know her," he said. "Fiordelisa Trevan, mistress of the house three doors down the canal."

"Yes. She is a nice woman. She was Mother's best friend among all our neighbors."

"If you are implying what I think you are, Marco, I remind you that your mother is in her grave, where there is no jealousy or envy or recrimination."

"Yes," I said. And I added impertinently, "But you are not wearing the luto vedovile."

"Your mother has been *eight years* in her grave. I should wear black now, and for another twelvemonth? I am not young enough to sequester myself in mourning for a year. Neither is the Dona Lisa any bambina."

"Have you proposed to her yet, Father?"

"Yes, and she has accepted. We go tomorrow for our pastoral interview with Pare Nunziata."

"Is she aware that you are going away immediately after you marry her?"

My uncle burst out, "What is this inquisition, you saputèlo?"

My father said patiently, "I am marrying her, Marco, *because* I am going away. Needs must when the devil drives. I came home expecting to find your mother still alive and still head of the house of Polo. She is not. And now--through your own fault--I cannot leave you entrusted with the business. Old Doro is a good man, and needs no one peering over his shoulder. Nevertheless, I prefer to have someone of the name of Polo standing as the figurehead of the company, if nothing more. Dona Fiordelisa will serve in that capacity, and willingly. Also, she has no children to compete for your inheritance, if that is what concerns you."

"It does not," I said. And again I spoke impertinently, "I am only concerned for the seeming disrespect to my own mother--and to the Dona Trevan as well--in your haste to marry solely for mercenary reasons. She must know that all Venice will be whispering and snickering."

My father said mildly, but with finality, "I am a merchant and she is the widow of a merchant and Venice is a merchant city, where all know that there is no better reason for doing *anything* than a mercenary reason. To a Venetian, money is the second blood, and you are a Venetian. Now, I have heard your objections, Marco, and I have dismissed them. I wish to hear no more. Remember, a closed mouth says nothing wrong."

So I kept my mouth closed and said nothing more on the subject, wrong or otherwise, and on the day my father married the Dona Lisa I stood in the confino church of San Felice with my uncle and all the free servants of both households and numerous neighbors and merchant nobles and their families, while the ancient Pare Nunziata tremblingly conducted the nuptial mass. But when the ceremony was over and the Pare pronounced them Messere e Madona and it was time for my father to lead his bride to her new dwelling, together with all the reception guests, I slipped away from the happy procession.

Although I was dressed in my best, I let my feet take me to the neighborhood of the boat people. I had only infrequently and briefly visited the children since my release from prison. Now that I was an ex-convict, the boys all seemed to regard me as a grown man, or maybe even a person of celebrity; anyway, there had come a sort of distance between us that had not existed before. However, on that day I found no one at the barge except Doris. She was kneeling on the planking inside its hull, wearing only a skimpy shift, and lifting wet wads of cloth from one pail to another.

"Boldo and the others begged a ride on a garbage scow going out to Torcello," she told me. "They will be gone all day, so I am taking the opportunity to wash everything not being worn by somebody."

"May I keep you company?" I asked. "And sleep here again in the barge tonight?"

"Your clothes will also need laundering, if you do," she said, eyeing them critically.

"I have had worse accommodations," I said. "And I own other clothes."

"What are you running away from this time, Marco?"

"This is my father's wedding day. He is bringing home a marègna for me, and I do not particularly want one. I have already had a real mother."

"I must have had one, too, but I would not mind having a marègna." She added, sighing like an exasperated grown woman, "Sometimes I feel I am one, to all this crowd of orphans."

"This Dona Fiordelisa is a nice enough woman," I said, sitting down with my back against the hull. "But I somehow do not wish to be under the same roof on my father's wedding night."

Doris looked at me with evident surmise, dropped what she was doing, and came to sit beside me.

"Very well," she whispered into my ear. "Stay here. And pretend that it is your own wedding night."

"Oh, Doris, are you starting that again?"

"I do not know why you should refuse. I am accustomed now to keeping myself clean, as you told me a lady ought to do. I keep myself clean all over. Look."

Before I could protest, she stripped off her one garment in one lithe movement. She was certainly clean, even to being totally hairless of body. The Lady Ilaria had not been quite so smooth and glossy all over. Of course, Doris was also lacking in feminine curves and rotundities. Her breasts were only just beginning to be distinct from her chest, and their nipples were only a faintly darker pink than her skin, and her flanks and buttocks were but lightly padded with womanly flesh.

"You are still a zuzzurullona," I said, trying to sound bored and uninterested. "You have a long way to go to become a woman."

That was true, but her very youth and smallness and immaturity had their own sort of appeal. Though all boys are lecherous, they usually lust for real women. Any girl of their own age, they tend to regard as only another playmate, a tomboy among the boys, a zuzzurullona. However, I was somewhat more advanced in that respect than most boys; I had already had the experience of a real woman. It had given me a taste for musical duets--and I had for some time been without that music--and here was a pretty novice pleading to be introduced to it.

"It would be dishonorable of me," I said, "even to pretend a wedding night." I was arguing with myself more than with her. "I have told you that I am going far away to Rome in a few days."

"So is your father. But it has not prevented his getting *really* married."

"True, and we quarreled about that. I did not think it right. But his new wife seems perfectly content."

"And so would I be. For now, let us pretend, Marco, and afterward I will wait, and you will come back. You said so--when there is another change of Doge."

"You look ridiculous, little Doris. Sitting here naked and talking of Doges and such." But she did not look ridiculous; she looked like one of the pert nymphs of old legend. I truly tried to argue. "Your brother always talks of what a good girl his sister--"

"Boldo will not be back until tonight, and he will know nothing of what happens between now and then."

"He would be furious," I went on, as if she had not interrupted. "We should have to fight again, the way we fought after he threw that fish so long ago."

Doris pouted. "You do not appreciate my generosity. It is a pleasure I offer you at the cost of pain to myself."

"Pain? How so?"

"The first time is always painful for a virgin. And unsatisfying. Every girl knows that. Every woman tells us so."

I said reflectively, "I do not know why it should be painful. Not if it is done the way my--" I decided it would be maladroit of me to mention my Lady Ilaria at this moment. "I mean, the way I have learned to do it."

"If that is true," said Doris, "you could earn the adoration of many virgins in your lifetime. Do show me this way you have learned."

"One begins by doing--certain preliminary things. Like this." I touched one of her diminutive nipples.

"The zizza? That only tickles."

"I believe the tickling changes to another sensation very soon."

Very soon she said, "Yes. You are right."

"The zizza likes it, too. See, it lifts to ask for more."

"Yes. Yes, it does." She slowly lay back, supine on the deck, and I followed her down.

I said, "A zizza likes even more to be kissed."

"Yes." Like a lazing cat, she stretched her whole little body, voluptuously.

"Then there is this," I said.

"That tickles, too."

"It also gets better than tickling."

"Yes. Truly it does. I feel ..."

"Not pained, surely."

She shook her head, her eyes now closed.

"These things do not even require the presence of a man. It is called the hymn of the convent, because girls can do this for themselves." I was being scrupulously fair, giving her the opportunity to send me away.

But she said only, and breathlessly, "I had no idea ... I do not even know what I *look* like down there."

"You could easily see your mona with a looking glass."

She said faintly, "I do not know anyone who owns a looking glass."

"Then look at--no, she is all hairy down there. Yours is still bare and visible and soft. And pretty. It looks like ..." I reached for a poetic comparison. "You know that kind of pasta shaped like a folded little shell? The

kind called ladylips?"

"You make it feel like lips being kissed," she said, as if talking in her sleep. Her eyes were closed again and her small body was moving in a slow squirm.

"Kissed, yes," I said.

From the slow squirm, her body seemed to clench briefly, then to relax, and she made a whimpering noise of delight. As I continued to play musically upon her, she made that slight convulsion again and again, each time lasting longer, as if she was learning through practice to prolong the enjoyment. Not ceasing my attentions to her, but using only my mouth, I had my hands free to strip off my own clothes. When I was naked against her, she appeared to enjoy her gentle spasms all the more, and her hands fluttered eagerly over my body. So I went on for quite a while, making the music of the convent, as Ilaria had taught me. When finally Doris was shiny with perspiration, I stopped and let her rest.

Her breathing slowed from its rapid pace, and she opened her eyes, looking dazed. Then she frowned, because she felt me hard against her, and she shamelessly moved a hand to take hold of me, and she said with surprise, "You did all that ... or you made me do all that ... and you never ..."

"No, not yet."

"I did not know." She laughed in great good humor. "I could not have known. I was far away. In the clouds somewhere." Still holding me in one hand, she felt herself with the other. "All that ... and I am still a virgin. It is miraculous. Do you suppose, Marco, that is how Our Blessed Virgin Lady--?"

"We are already sinning, Doris," I said quickly. "Let us not add blasphemy."

"No. Let us sin some more."

And we did, and I soon had Doris cooing and quivering again--in the clouds somewhere, as she had said--enjoying the hymn of the nuns. And finally I did what no nun can do, and that happened not roughly or forcibly, but easily and naturally. Doris, sleek with perspiration, moved without friction in my arms, and that part of her was even more moist. So she felt no violation, but only a more intense sensation among the many new ones she had been experiencing. She opened her eyes when that happened, and her eyes were brimming with pleasure, and the whimper she gave was merely in a different musical register from the previous ones. It was a new sensation for me, too. Inside Doris, I was held as tightly as in a tender fist, far more tightly than I had been in either of the other two females with whom I had lain. Even in that moment of high excitement, I realized that I was disproving my onetime ignorant assertion that all women are alike in their private parts. For the next while, both Doris and I made many different noises. And the final sound, when we stopped moving to rest, was her sigh of commingled wonder and satisfaction: "Oh, my!"

"I think it was not painful," I said, and smiled at her.

She shook her head vehemently, and returned the smile. "I havedreamt of it many times. But I never dreamed it would be so ... And I never heard any woman recall her first time as so ... Thank you, Marco."

"I thank you, Doris," I said politely. "And now that you know how--"

"Hush. I do not wish to do anything like that with anyone but you."

"I will soon be gone."

"I know. But I know you will be back. And I will not do that again until you come back from Rome."

However, I did not get to Rome. I have never been there yet. Doris and I went on disporting ourselves until nightfall, and we were dressed again and behaving most properly when Ubaldo and Daniele and Malgarita and the others returned from their day's excursion. When we retired into the barge to sleep, I slept alone, on the same pallet of rags I had used once before. And we were all awakened in the morning by the bawling of a banditore, making unusually early rounds because he had unusual news to cry. Pope Clement IV had died in Viterbo. The Doge of Venice was proclaiming a period of mourning and of prayer for the Holy Father's soul. "Damnation!" bellowed my uncle, slapping the table and making the books on it jump. "Did we bring bad luck home with us, Nico?"

"First a Doge dies, and now the Pope," my father said sadly. "Ah, well, all psalms end in glory."

"And the word from Viterbo," said the clerk Isidoro, in whose counting room we were gathered, "is that there may be a long deadlock in the Conclave. It seems there are many feet twitching with eagerness to step into

the Fisherman's shoes."

"We cannot wait for the election, soon or late," my uncle muttered, and he glowered at me. "We must get this galeotto out of Venice, or we may all go to prison."

"We need not wait," my father said, unperturbed. "Doro has most capably purchased and collected all the travel gear we will need. We only lack the hundred priests, and Kubilai will not care if they are not chosen by a Pope. Any high prelate can provide them."

"To what prelate do we apply?" demanded Mafio. "If we asked the Patriarch of Venice, he would tell us--and with reason--that to lend us one hundred priests would empty every church in the city."

"And we would have to take them the extra distance," my father mused. "Better we seek them closer to our destination."

"Forgive my ignorance," said my new marègna, Fiordelisa. "But why on earth are you recruiting priests--and so many priests--for a savage Mongol warlord? Surely he cannot be a Christian."

My father said, "He is of no discernible religion, Lisa."

"I would have thought not."

"But he has that virtue peculiar to the ungodly: he is tolerant of what other people choose to believe. Indeed, he wishes his subjects to have an ample array of beliefs from which to choose. There are in his lands many preachers of many pagan religions, but of the Christian faith there are only the deluded and debased Nestorian priests. Kubilai desires that we provide adequate representation for the true Christian Church of Rome.

Naturally, Mafio and I are eager to comply--and not alone for the propagation of the Holy Faith. If we can accomplish this mission, we can ask the Khan's permission to engage in missions more profitable."

"Nico means to say," my uncle said, "that we hope to arrange to trade between Venice and the Eastern lands--to start again the flow of commerce along the Silk Road."

Lisa said wonderingly, "There is a road laid of silk?"

"Would that it were!" said my uncle, rolling his eyes. "It is more tortuous and terrible and punishing than any pathway to Heaven. Even to call it a road is an extravagance."

Isidoro begged leave to explain to the lady: "The route from the Levantine shores across the interior of Asia has been called the Silk Road since ancient times, because the silk of Cathay was the most costly merchandise carried along it. In those days, silk was worth its weight in gold. And perhaps the road itself, being so precious, was better maintained and easier to travel. But in more recent times it fell into disuse--partly because the secret of silkmaking was stolen from Cathay, and today silk is cultivated even in Sicily. But also those Eastern lands became impossible to traverse, what with the depredations of Huns, Tartars, Mongols, marauding back and forth across Asia. So our Western traders abandoned the overland route in favor of the sea routes known to the Arab seafarers."

"If you can get there by sea," Lisa said to my father, "why suffer all the rigors and dangers of going by land?"

He said, "Those sea routes are forbidden to our ships. The once pacific Arabs, long content to live meekly in the peace of their Prophet, rose up to become the warrior Saracens, who now seek to impose that religion of Islam on the entire world. And they are as jealous of their sea lanes as they are of their current possession of the Holy Land."

Mafio said, "The Saracens are willing to trade with us Venetians, and with any other Christians from whom they can make a profit. But we would deprive them of that profit if we sent fleets of our own ships to trade in the East. So the Saracen corsairs are on constant patrol in the seas between, to make sure we do not."

Lisa looked primly shocked, and said, "They are our enemies, but we trade with them?"

Isidoro shrugged. "Business is business."

"Even the Popes," said Uncle Mafio, "have never been unwilling to deal with the heathen, when it has been profitable. And a Pope or any other pragmatist ought to be eager to institute trade with the even farther East. There are fortunes to be made. We know; we have seen the richness of those lands. Our former journey was mere exploration, but this time we will take along something to trade. The Silk Road is awful, but it is not impossible. We have now traversed those lands twice, going and coming. We can do it again."

"Whoever is the new Pope," said my father, "he should give his blessing to this venture. Rome was much affrighted when it looked as if the Mongols would overrun Europe. But the several Mongol Khans seem to have extended their Khanates as far westward as they intend to encroach. That means the Saracens are the chief threat to Christianity. So Rome ought to welcome this chance for an alliance with the Mongols against Islam. Our mission on behalf of the Khan of All Khans could be of supreme importance--to the aims of Mother Church as well as the prosperity of Venice."

"And the house of Polo," said Fiordelisa, who was now of our house.

"That above all," said Mafio. "So let us stop beating our beaks, Nico, and get on with it. Shall we go again by way of Constantinople and collect our priests there?"

My father thought it over and said, "No. The priests there are too comfortable--all gone soft as eunuchs. The gloved cat catches no mice. However, in the ranks of the Crusaders are many chaplain priests, and they will be hard men accustomed to hard living. Let us go to the Holy Land, to San Zuàne de Acre, where the Crusaders are presently encamped. Doro, is there a ship sailing eastward that can put us in Acre?"

The clerk turned to consult his registers, and I left the warehouse to go and tell Doris of my new destination and to say, to her and to Venice, goodbye.

It was to be a quarter of a century before I saw either of them again. Much would have changed and aged in that time, not least myself. But Venice would still be Venice, and--strangely--so would Doris somehow still be the Doris I had left. What she had said: that she would not love again until I came back--those words could have been a magic charm that preserved her unchanged by the years. For she would still, that long time later, be so young and so pretty and so vibrantly still Doris that I would recognize her on sight and fall instantly enamored of her. Or so it would seem to me.

But that story I will tell in its place.

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