HENTY GEORGE ALFRED

THE LION OF SAINT MARK: A STORY OF VENICE IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

George Henty

The Lion of Saint Mark: A Story of Venice in the Fourteenth Century

Henty G.

The Lion of Saint Mark: A Story of Venice in the Fourteenth Century / G. Henty — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

G. A. Henty
The Lion of Saint Mark: A Story of Venice in the Fourteenth Century

Preface

Of all the chapters of history, there are few more interesting or wonderful than that which tells the story of the rise and progress of Venice. Built upon a few sandy islands in a shallow lagoon, and originally founded by fugitives from the mainland, Venice became one of the greatest and most respected powers of Europe. She was mistress of the sea; conquered and ruled over a considerable territory bordering on the Adriatic; checked the rising power of the Turks; conquered Constantinople; successfully defied all the attacks of her jealous rivals to shake her power; and carried on a trade relatively as great as that of England in the present day. I have laid my story in the time not of the triumphs of Venice, but of her hardest struggle for existence–when she defended herself successfully against the coalition of Hungary, Padua, and Genoa–for never at any time were the virtues of Venice, her steadfastness, her patriotism, and her willingness to make all sacrifice for her independence, more brilliantly shown. The historical portion of the story is drawn from Hazlitt's History of the Republic of Venice, and with it I have woven the adventures of an English boy, endowed with a full share of that energy and pluck which, more than any other qualities, have made the British empire the greatest the world has ever seen.

G. A. Henty.

Chapter 1: Venice

"I suppose you never have such nights as these in that misty island of yours, Francisco?"

"Yes, we have," the other said stoutly. "I have seen just as bright nights on the Thames. I have stood down by Paul's Stairs and watched the reflection of the moon on the water, and the lights of the houses on the bridge, and the passing boats, just as we are doing now.

"But," he added honestly, "I must confess that we do not have such still, bright nights very often, while with you they are the rule, though sometimes even here a mist rises up and dims the water, just as it does with us."

"But I have heard you say that the stars are not so bright as we have them here."

"No, I do not think they are, Matteo. I do not remember now, but I do know, when I first came here, I was struck with the brightness of the stars, so I suppose there must have been a difference."

"But you like this better than England? You are glad that your father came out here?"

Francis Hammond did not answer at once.

"I am glad he came out," he said after a pause, "because I have seen many things I should never have seen if I had stayed at home, and I have learned to speak your tongue. But I do not know that I like it better than home. Things are different, you see. There was more fun at home. My father had two or three apprentices, whom I used to play with when the shop was closed, and there were often what you would call tumults, but which were not serious. Sometimes there would be a fight between the apprentices of one ward and another. A shout would be raised of 'Clubs!' and all the 'prentices would catch up their sticks and pour out of the shops, and then there would be a fight till the city guard turned out and separated them. Then there used to be the shooting at the butts, and the shows, and the Mayday revels, and all sorts of things. The people were more merry than you are here, and much more free. You see, the barons, who are the same to us that your great families are to you, had no influence in the city. You are a nation of traders, and so are we; but in London the traders have the power, and are absolute masters inside their own walls, caring nothing for the barons, and not much for the king. If anyone did wrong he got an open and fair trial. There was no fear of secret accusations. Everyone thought and said as he pleased. There was no Lion's Mouth, and no Council of Ten."

"Hush! hush! Francisco," the other said, grasping his arm. "Do not say a word against the council. There is no saying who may be listening."

And he looked nervously round to see if anyone was within earshot.

"There it is, you see," his companion said. "So long as we have a safe conscience, in London we are frightened at nothing, whereas here no one can say with certainty that he may not, before tomorrow morning, be lying in the dungeons of St. Mark, without the slightest idea in the world as to what his crime has been."

"There, there, Francisco," Matteo said uneasily. "Do talk about other things. Your notions may do very well in England, but are not safe to discuss here. Of course there are plenty here who would gladly see a change in some matters, but one cannot have everything; and, after all, when one has so much to be proud of, one need not grumble because everything is not just as one would like."

"Yes, you have much to be proud of," Francis Hammond agreed. "It is marvellous that the people of these scattered islets should be masters of the sea, that their alliance should be coveted by every power in Europe, that they should be the greatest trading community in the world. If I were not English I should like to be Venetian."

The speakers were standing at the edge of the water in front of the Palace of St. Mark. In the piazza behind them a throng of people were walking to and fro, gossiping over the latest news from Constantinople, the last rumour as to the doings of the hated rival of Venice, Genoa, or the purport of the letter which had, as everyone knew, been brought by the Bishop of Treviso from the pope to the seignory.

The moon was shining brightly overhead, and glittering in the waters of the lagoon, which were broken into innumerable little wavelets by the continual crossing and recrossing of the gondolas dotting its surface. There was a constant arrival and departure of boats from the steps, fifty yards to the right of the spot where the speakers were standing; but where they had stationed themselves, about halfway between the landing steps and the canal running down by the side of the ducal palace, there were but few people about.

Francis Hammond was a lad between fifteen and sixteen years old. His father was a merchant of London. He was a man of great enterprise and energy, and had four years before determined to leave his junior partner in charge of the business in London, and to come out himself for a time to Venice, so as to buy the Eastern stuffs in which he dealt at the headquarters of the trade, instead of paying such prices as the agents of the Venetian traders might demand in London.

He had succeeded beyond his expectations. In Venice there were constantly bargains to be purchased from ships returning laden with the spoils of some captured Genoese merchantman, or taken in the sack of some Eastern seaport. The prices, too, asked by the traders with the towns of Syria or the Black Sea, were but a fraction of those charged when these goods arrived in London. It was true that occasionally some of his cargoes were lost on the homeward voyage, captured either by the Genoese or the Moorish pirates; but even allowing for this, the profits of the trade were excellent.

The English merchant occupied a good position in Venice. The promptness of his payments, and the integrity of his dealings, made him generally respected; and the fact that he was engaged in trade was no drawback to his social position, in a city in which, of all others, trade was considered honourable, and where members of even the most aristocratic families were, with scarcely an exception, engaged in commerce. There were many foreign merchants settled in Venice, for from the first the republic had encouraged strangers to take up their residence there, and had granted them several privileges and advantages.

Between Venice and England there had always been good feeling. Although jealous of foreigners, England had granted the Venetians liberty to trade in London, Southampton, and some other towns as far back as the year 1304; and their relations had always been cordial, as there were no grounds for jealousy or rivalry between the two peoples; whereas the interference of France, Germany, Austria, and Hungary in the affairs of Italy, had frequently caused uneasiness to Venice, and had on several occasions embroiled her with one or other of the three last named powers. France had as yet taken a very minor part in the continual wars which were waged between the rival cities of Italy, and during the Crusades there had been a close alliance between her and Venice, the troops of the two nations fighting together at the siege of Constantinople, and causing the temporary overthrow of the Greek Empire of the East.

The rise of Venice had been rapid, and she owed her advancement to a combination of circumstances. In the first place, her insular position rendered her almost impervious to attack, and she had therefore no occasion to keep on foot any army, and was able to throw all her strength on to the sea, where Genoa was her only formidable rival. In the second place, her mercantile spirit, and her extensive trade with the East, brought in a steady influx of wealth, and her gold enabled her to purchase allies, to maintain lengthy struggles without faltering, and to emerge unscathed from wars which exhausted the resources, and crippled the powers, of her rivals.

The third source of her success lay in the spirit of her population. Like Rome in her early days, she was never cast down by reverses. Misfortune only nerved her to further exertions, and after each defeat she rose stronger than before. But the cause which, more than all, contributed to give to Venice her ascendancy among the cities of Italy, was her form of government. Democratic at first, as among all communities, it had gradually assumed the character of a close oligarchy, and although nominally ruled by a council containing a large number of members, her destinies were actually in the hands of the Doge, elected for life, and the Council of Ten, chosen from the great body of the council. Thus she had from the first been free from those factions which were the bane of Genoa and Florence.

Some of the great families had from time to time come more prominently to the front than others, but none had attained predominant political power, and beyond a few street tumults of slight importance, Venice had not suffered from the popular tumults and uprisings which played so prominent a part in the history of her rivals.

Thus, undisturbed by discord at home, Venice had been able to give all her attention and all her care to her interests abroad, and her affairs, conducted as they were by her wisest citizens, with a single eye to the benefit of the state, had been distinguished by a rare sagacity. Her object had been single and uniform, to protect her own interests, and to prevent any one city on the mainland attaining such a preponderance as would render her a dangerous neighbour. Hence she was always ready to ally herself with the weaker against the stronger, and to aid with money and men any state struggling against an ambitious neighbour. Acting on this principle she by turns assisted Padua against Verona, and Verona against Padua, or either of them when threatened by the growing power of Milan, and at the end of a war she generally came out with an increased territory, and added importance.

It is probable that no community was ever governed, for hundreds of years, with such uniform wisdom and sagacity as was Venice; but the advantage was not without drawbacks. The vigilance of the Council of Ten in repressing plots, not unfrequently set on foot by the enemies of the republic, resulted in the adoption of a hateful system of espionage. The city was pervaded with spies, and even secret denunciations were attended to, and the slightest expression of discontent against the ruling authorities was severely punished. On the other hand, comparatively slight attention was paid to private crime. Assassinations were of frequent occurrence, and unless the victim happened to be very powerfully connected, no notice was taken when a man was found to be missing from his usual place, and his corpse was discovered floating in the lagoon. Consequently crimes of this kind were, in the great majority of cases, committed with impunity, and even when traced, the authors, if possessed of powerful protectors, seldom suffered any greater punishment than temporary banishment.

After standing for some time on the Piazzetta, the two lads turned and, entering the square of Saint Mark, mingled with the crowd. It was a motley one. Nobles in silks and satins jostled with fishermen of the lagoons. Natives of all the coasts and islands which owned the sway of Venice, Greeks from Constantinople, Tartar merchants from the Crimea, Tyrians, and inhabitants of the islands of the Aegean, were present in considerable numbers; while among the crowd, vendors of fruit and flowers from the mainland, and of fresh water or cooling drinks, sold their wares. The English lad's companion–Matteo Giustiniani–belonged to one of the leading families of Venice, and was able to name to Francis most of the nobles and persons of importance whom they passed.

"There is Pisani," he said. "Of course you know him. What a jolly, good-tempered looking fellow he is! The sailors would do anything for him, and they say he will have command of the next fleet that puts to sea. I wish I was going with him. There is sure to be a fierce fight when he comes across the Genoese. His father was one of our greatest admirals.

"That noble just behind him is Fiofio Dandolo. What a grand family they have been, what a number of great men they have given to the republic! I should like to have seen the grand old Doge who stormed the walls of Constantinople, and divided the Eastern empire among the crusading barons. He was a hero indeed.

"No; I don't know who that young noble in the green velvet cap and plum coloured dress is. O yes, I do, though; it is Ruggiero Mocenigo; he has been away for the last two years at Constantinople; he was banished for having killed Polo Morosini–he declared it was in fair fight, but no one believed him. They had quarrelled a few days before over some question of the precedence of their families, and Morosini was found dead at the top of the steps close to the church of Saint Paolo. Some people heard a cry and ran up just as Mocenigo leapt into his gondola, but as it rowed off their shouts called the attention of one of the city guard boats which happened to be passing, and it was stopped. As his sword was still wet with blood, he could not deny that he was the author of the deed, but, as I said, he declared it was in fair fight. The Morosinis asserted that Polo's sword was undrawn, but the Mocenigo

family brought forward a man, who swore that he was one of the first to arrive, and pick up the sword and place it in its scabbard to prevent its being lost. No doubt he lied; but as Mocenigo's influence in the council was greater than that of the Morosini, the story was accepted. However, the public feeling was so strong that they could not do less than sentence Ruggiero to two years' banishment. I suppose that has just expired, and he has returned from Constantinople. He had a bad reputation before this affair took place, but as his connections are so powerful, I suppose he will be received as if nothing had happened. There are plenty of others as bad as he is."

"It's a scandalous thing," Francis Hammond said indignantly, "that, just because they have got powerful connections, men should be allowed to do, almost with impunity, things for which an ordinary man would be hung. There ought to be one law for the rich as well as the poor."

"So there is as far as the state is concerned," his companion replied. "A noble who plots against the state is as certain of a place in the lowest dungeons as a fisherman who has done the same; but in other respects there is naturally some difference."

"Why naturally?" Francis retorted. "You belong to a powerful family, Giustiniani, and my father is only a trader, but I don't see that naturally you have any more right to get me stabbed in the back, than I have to get you put out of the way."

"Naturally perhaps not," Matteo laughed; "but you see it has become a second nature to us here in Venice. But seriously I admit that the present state of things has grown to be a scandal, and that the doings of some of our class ought to be put down with a strong hand."

"Well, I shall say goodnight now," the English boy said. "My father doesn't like my being out after ten. He keeps up his English habits of shutting up early, and has not learned to turn night into day as you do here in Venice."

"The bell has just tolled the hour, Francis," his father said as he entered.

"I didn't think it was quite so late, father; the Piazza is crowded. I really do not think there is one person in Venice who goes to bed so early as we do. It is so pleasant in the moonlight after the heat of the day."

"That is true enough, Francis, but men are meant to sleep at night and to work in the day. I think our fathers carried this too far when they rang the curfew at eight; but ten is quite late enough for any honest man to be about in the streets, and the hours of the early morning are just as pleasant and far more healthy than those of the evening, especially in a place like this where the mists rise from the water, to say nothing of the chance of meeting a band of wild gallants on their way homewards heated with wine, or of getting a stab in the back from some midnight assassin. However, I do not blame Venice for enjoying herself while she can. She will have more serious matters to attend to soon."

"But she is at peace with every one at present, father. I thought when she signed the treaty with Austria after a year's fighting, she was going to have rest for a time."

"That was only the beginning of the trouble, Francis, and the council knew it well; that was why they made such terms with Austria as they did. They knew that Austria was only acting in accord with Hungary, and Padua, and Genoa. The others were not ready to begin, so Austria came on her own account to get what booty and plunder she could. But the storm is gathering, and will burst before long. But do not let us stand talking here any longer. It is high time for you to be in bed."

But though Francis retired to his room, it was more than an hour before he got into bed. His window looked down upon one of the canals running into the Grand Canal. Gondolas lighted by lanterns, or by torches held by servitors, passed constantly backwards and forwards beneath his window, and by leaning out he could see the passing lights of those on the Grand Canal. Snatches of song and laughter came up to him, and sometimes the note of a musical instrument. The air was soft and balmy, and he felt no inclination for sleep.

Francis thought over what his father had said of the probability of war, as he sat at his window, and wished that he were a couple of years older and could take part in the struggle. The Venetian fleet had performed such marvels of valour, that, in the days when military service was almost the sole

avenue to distinction and fortune, the desire to take part in a naval expedition, which promised unusual opportunities of gaining credit and renown, was the most natural thing possible for a boy of spirit.

Francis was a well built lad of nearly sixteen. He had, until he left London when about twelve years old, taken his full share in the rough sports which formed so good a training for the youths of England, and in which the citizens of London were in no way behind the rest of the kingdom. He had practised shooting with a light bow and arrows, in company with boys of his own age, in the fields outside the city walls; had engaged in many a rough tussle with light clubs and quarterstaffs; and his whole time–except for an hour or two daily which he had, as the son of a well to do citizen, spent in learning to read and write–had been occupied in games and exercises of one kind or other.

Since his arrival in Venice he had not altogether discontinued his former habits. At his earnest solicitation, his father had permitted him to attend the School of Arms, where the sons of patricians and well-to-do merchants learned the use of sword and dagger, to hurl the javelin, and wield the mace and battleaxe; and was, besides, a frequenter of some of the schools where old soldiers gave private lessons in arms to such as could afford it; and the skill and strength of the English lad excited no slight envy among the young Venetian nobles. Often, too, he would go out to one of the sandy islets, and there setting up a mark, practise with the bow. His muscles too, had gained strength and hardness by rowing. It was his constant habit of an evening, when well away from the crowded canals in the gondola, with Giuseppi, the son and assistant of his father's gondolier, to take an oar, for he had thoroughly mastered the difficult accomplishment of rowing well in a gondola; but he only did this when far out from the city, or when the darkness of evening would prevent his figure from being recognized by any of his acquaintances, for no Venetian of good family would demean himself by handling an oar. Francis, however, accustomed to row upon the Thames, could see no reason why he should not do the same in a gondola, and in time he and his companion could send the boat dancing over the water, at a rate which enabled them to overtake and distance most pair-oared boats.

After breakfast next morning he went down to the steps, where Beppo and Giuseppi, in their black cloth suits with red sashes round their waists, were waiting with the gondola in which Mr. Hammond was going out to Malamocco, to examine a cargo which had the day before arrived from Azoph. Giuseppi jumped ashore.

"I have heard of just the gondola to suit you, Messer Francisco, and you can get her a bargain."

"What is she like, Giuseppi?"

"She belongs to a man out at Lido. She was built for the race two years ago, but her owner fell sick and was unable to start. He has not got strong again, and wants to sell his boat, which is far too light for ordinary work. They say she is almost like an eggshell, and you and I will be able to send her along grandly. She cost four ducats, but he will sell her for two."

"That is capital, Giuseppi. This gondola is all well enough for my father, but she is very heavy. This evening we will row over to Lido and look at her."

A few minutes later Mr. Hammond came down. Beppo and his son took off their jackets, and in their snow white shirts and black trousers, set off by the red scarf and a red ribbon round their broad hats, took their places on the bow and stern. Mr. Hammond sat down on the cushions in the middle of the boat, and with an easy, noiseless motion the gondola glided away from the stairs. Francis, with a little sigh, turned away and strolled off for a couple of hours' work with the preceptor, with whom he had continued his studies since he came to Venice.

This work consisted chiefly of learning various languages, for in those days there was little else to learn. Latin was almost universally spoken by educated men in southern Europe, and Greeks, Italians, Spaniards, and Frenchmen were able to converse in this common medium. French Francis understood, for it was the language in use in the court and among the upper classes in England. Italian he picked up naturally during his residence, and spoke it with the facility of a native. He could now converse freely in Latin, and had some knowledge of German. At the same school were many lads of

good Venetian families, and it was here that he had first made the acquaintance of Matteo Giustiniani, who was now his most intimate friend.

Matteo, like all the young nobles of Venice, was anxious to excel in military exercises, but he had none of the ardour for really hard work which distinguished his friend. He admired the latter's strength and activity, but could not bring himself to imitate him, in the exercises by which that strength was attained, and had often remonstrated with him upon his fondness for rowing.

"It is not seemly, Francisco, for a gentleman to be labouring like a common gondolier. These men are paid for doing it; but what pleasure there can be in standing up working that oar, till you are drenched with perspiration, I cannot understand. I don't mind getting hot in the School of Arms, because one cannot learn to use the sword and dagger without it, but that's quite another thing from tugging at an oar."

"But I like it, Matteo; and see how strong it has made my muscles, not of the arm only, but the leg and back. You often say you envy me my strength, but you might be just as strong if you chose to work as I do. Besides, it is delightful, when you are accustomed to it, to feel the gondola flying away under your stroke."

"I prefer feeling it fly away under some one else's stroke, Francisco. That is pleasant enough, I grant; but the very thought of working as you do throws me into a perspiration. I should like to be as strong as you are, but to work as a gondolier is too high a price to pay for it."

That evening, Francis crossed the lagoon in the gondola with Giuseppi, to inspect the boat he had heard of. It was just what he wanted. In appearance it differed in no way from an ordinary gondola, but it was a mere shell. The timbers and planking were extremely light, and the weight of the boat was little more than a third of that of other craft. She had been built like a working gondola, instead of in the form of those mostly used for racing, because her owner had intended, after the race was over, to plank her inside and strengthen her for everyday work. But the race had never come off, and the boat lay just as she had come from the hands of her builder, except that she had been painted black, like other gondolas, to prevent her planks from opening. When her owner had determined to part with her he had given her a fresh coat of paint, and had put her in the water, that her seams might close up.

"I don't like parting with her," the young fisherman to whom she belonged said. "I tried her once or twice, and she went like the wind, but I got fever in my bones and I am unlikely to race again, and the times are hard, and I must part with her."

Francis and Giuseppi gave her a trial, and were delighted with the speed and ease with which she flew through the water. On their return Francis at once paid the price asked for her. His father made him a handsome allowance, in order that he might be able to mix, without discomfort, with the lads of good family whom he met at his preceptor's and at the schools of arms. But Francis did not care for strolling in the Piazza, or sitting for hours sipping liquors. Still less did he care for dress or finery. Consequently he had always plenty of money to indulge in his own special fancies.

As soon as the bargain was completed, Giuseppi took his place in the old gondola, while Francis took the oar in his new acquisition, and found to his satisfaction that with scarcely an effort he could dart ahead of his companion and leave him far behind. By nightfall the two gondolas were fastened, side by side, behind the gaily painted posts which, in almost all Venetian houses, are driven into the canal close to the steps, and behind which the gondolas belonging to the house lie safe from injury by passing craft.

"I have bought another gondola, father," Francis said the next morning. "She is a very light, fast craft, and I got her cheap."

"I don't see what you wanted another gondola for, Francis. I do not use mine very much, and you are always welcome to take it when I do not want it."

"Yes, father, but you often use it in the evening, and that is just the time when one wants to go out. You very often only take Beppo with you, when you do not go on business, and I often want a boat that I could take with Giuseppi. Besides, your gondola is a very solid one, and I like passing people."

"Young people always want to go fast," Mr. Hammond said. "Why, I can't make out. However, Francis, I am not sorry that you have got a boat of your own, for it has happened several times lately, that when in the evening I have gone down intending to row round to the Piazzetta, I have found the boat gone, and have had to walk. Now I shall be able to rely on finding Beppo asleep in the boat at the steps. In future, since you have a boat of your own, I shall not be so particular as to your being in at ten. I do not so much mind your being out on the water, only you must promise me that you will not be in the streets after that hour. There are frequent broils as the evening gets on, not to mention the danger of cutthroats in unfrequented lanes; but if you will promise me that you will never be about the streets after half past nine, I will give you leave to stay out on the water till a later hour; but when you come in late be careful always to close and bar the door, and do not make more noise than you can help in coming up to your room."

Francis was much pleased with this concession, for the obligation to return at ten o'clock, just when the temperature was most delightful and the Grand Canal at its gayest, had been very irksome to him. As to the prohibition against being in the streets of Venice after half past nine, he felt that no hardship whatever, as he found no amusement in strolling in the crowded Piazza.

Chapter 2: A Conspiracy

"Who are those ladies, Matteo?" Francis asked his friend one evening, as the latter, who was sitting with him in his gondola, while Giuseppi rowed them along the Grand Canal, half rose and saluted two girls in a passing gondola.

"They are distant cousins of mine, Maria and Giulia Polani. They only returned a short time since from Corfu. Their father is one of the richest merchants of our city. He has for the last three years been living in Corfu, which is the headquarters of his trade. The family is an old one, and has given doges to Venice. They are two of our richest heiresses, for they have no brothers. Their mother died soon after the birth of Giulia."

"They both look very young," Francis said.

"Maria is about sixteen, her sister two years younger. There will be no lack of suitors for their hands, for although the family is not politically powerful, as it used to be, their wealth would cause them to be gladly received in our very first families."

"Who was the middle-aged lady sitting between them?"

"She is only their duenna," Matteo said carelessly. "She has been with them since they were children, and their father places great confidence in her. And he had need to, for Maria will ere long be receiving bouquets and perfumed notes from many a young gallant."

"I can quite fancy that," Francis said, "for she is very pretty as well as very rich, and, as far as I have observed, the two things do not go very often together. However, no doubt by this time her father has pretty well arranged in his mind whom she is to marry."

"I expect so," agreed Matteo.

"That is the worst of being born of good family. You have got to marry some one of your father's choice, not your own, and that choice is determined simply by the desire to add to the political influence of the family, to strengthen distant ties, or to obtain powerful connections. I suppose it is the same everywhere, Matteo, but I do think that a man or woman ought to have some voice in a matter of such importance to them."

"I think so, too, at the present time," Matteo laughed; "but I don't suppose that I shall be of that opinion when I have a family of sons and daughters to marry.

"This gondola of yours must be a fast one indeed, Francisco, for with only one rower she keeps up with almost all the pair oared boats, and your boy is not exerting himself to the utmost, either."

"She can fly along, I can tell you, Matteo. You shall come out in her some evening when Giuseppi and I both take oars. I have had her ten days now, and we have not come across anything that can hold her for a moment."

"It is always useful," Matteo said, "to have a fast boat. It is invaluable in case you have been getting into a scrape, and have one of the boats of the city watch in chase of you."

"I hope I sha'n't want it for any purpose of that sort," Francis answered, laughing. "I do not think I am likely to give cause to the city watch to chase me."

"I don't think you are, Francisco, but there is never any saying."

"At any rate it is always useful to be able to go fast if necessary, and if we did want to get away, I do not think there are many pair-oared gondolas afloat that would overtake us, though a good four oar might do so. Giuseppi and I are so accustomed to each other's stroke now, that though in a heavy boat we might not be a match for two men, in a light craft like this, where weight does not count for so much, we would not mind entering her for a race against the two best gondoliers on the canals, in an ordinary boat."

A few evenings later, Francis was returning homewards at about half past ten, when, in passing along a quiet canal, the boat was hailed from the shore.

"Shall we take him, Messer Francisco?" Giuseppi asked in a low voice; for more than once they had late in the evening taken a fare.

Francis rowed, like Giuseppi, in his shirt, and in the darkness they were often taken for a pair-oared gondola on the lookout for a fare. Francis had sometimes accepted the offer, because it was an amusement to see where the passenger wished to go–to guess whether he was a lover hastening to keep an appointment, a gambler on a visit to some quiet locality, where high play went on unknown to the authorities, or simply one who had by some error missed his own gondola, and was anxious to return home. It made no difference to him which way he rowed. It was always possible that some adventure was to be met with, and the fare paid was a not unwelcome addition to Giuseppi's funds.

"Yes, we may as well take him," he replied to Giuseppi's question.

"You are in no hurry to get to bed, I suppose?" the man who had hailed them said as the boat drew up against the wall of the canal.

"It does not make much difference to us, if we are well paid, to keep awake," Giuseppi said.

Upon such occasions he was always the spokesman.

"You know San Nicolo?"

"Yes, I know it," Giuseppi said; "but it is a long row–six miles, if it's a foot."

"You will have to wait there for an hour or two, but I will give you half a ducat for your night's work."

"What do you say, partner?" Giuseppi asked Francis.

"We may as well go," the lad replied after a moment's pause.

The row was certainly a long one, but the night was delightful, and the half ducat was a prize for Giuseppi; but what influenced Francis principally in accepting was curiosity. San Nicolo was a little sandy islet lying quite on the outside of the group of islands. It was inhabited only by a few fishermen; and Francis wondered that a man, evidently by his voice and manner of address belonging to the upper class, should want to go to such a place as this at this hour of the night. Certainly no ordinary motives could actuate him.

As the stranger took his place in the boat, Francis saw by the light of the stars that he was masked; but there was nothing very unusual in this, as masks were not unfrequently worn at night by young gallants, when engaged on any frolic in which they wished their identity to be unrecognized. Still it added to the interest of the trip; and dipping his oar in the water he set out at a slow, steady stroke well within his power. He adopted this partly in view of the length of the row before them, partly because the idea struck him that it might be as well that their passenger should not suspect that the boat was other than an ordinary gondola. The passenger, however, was well satisfied with the speed, for they passed two or three other gondolas before issuing from the narrow canals, and starting across the broad stretch of the lagoon.

Not a word was spoken until the gondola neared its destination. Then the passenger said:

"You row well. If you like the job I may employ you again."

"We are always ready to earn money," Francis said, speaking in a gruff voice quite unlike his own.

"Very well. I will let you know, as we return, what night I shall want you again. I suppose you can keep your mouths shut on occasion, and can go without gossiping to your fellows as to any job on which you are employed?"

"We can do that," Francis said. "It's no matter to us where our customers want to go, if they are willing to pay for it; and as to gossiping, there is a saying, 'A silver gag is the best for keeping the mouth closed.'"

A few minutes later the bow of the gondola ran up on the sandy shore of San Nicolo. The stranger made his way forward and leapt out, and with the words, "It may be two hours before I am back," walked rapidly away.

"Why, Messer Francisco," Giuseppi said when their passenger was well out of hearing, "what on earth possessed you to accept a fare to such a place as this? Of course, for myself, I am glad enough to earn half a ducat, which will buy me a new jacket with silver buttons for the next festa; but to make such a journey as this was too much, and it will be very late before we are back. If the padrone knew it he would be very angry."

"I didn't do it to enable you to earn half a ducat, Giuseppi, although I am glad enough you should do so; but I did it because it seemed to promise the chance of an adventure. There must be something in this. A noble–for I have no doubt he is one–would never be coming out to San Nicolo, at this time of night, without some very strong motive. There can be no rich heiress whom he might want to carry off living here, so that can't be what he has come for. I think there must be some secret meeting, for as we came across the lagoon I saw one or two beats in the distance heading in this direction. Anyhow, I mean to try and find out what it all means."

"You had better not, sir," Giuseppi said earnestly. "If there is any plot on foot we had best not get mixed up in it. No one is too high or too low to escape the vengeance of the council, if found plotting against the state; and before now gondolas, staved in and empty, have been found drifting on the lagoons, and the men who rowed them have never been heard of again. Once in the dungeons of Saint Mark it would be of no use to plead that you had entered into the affair simply for the amusement. The fact that you were not a regular boatman would make the matter all the worse, and the maxim that 'dead men tell no tales' is largely acted upon in Venice.

"I think, sir, the best plan will be to row straight back, and leave our fare to find his way home as best he may."

"I mean to find something out about it if I can, Giuseppi. A state secret may be dangerous, but it may be valuable. Anyhow, there can be no great risk in it. On the water I think we can show our heels to anyone who chases us; and once in Venice, we are absolutely safe, for no one would suspect a gondola of Mr. Hammond, the English merchant, of having any connection with a hired craft with its two gondoliers."

"That is true enough, sir; but I don't like it for all that. However, if you have made up your mind to it, there is nothing more to be said."

"Very well. You stay here, and I will go and look round. You had better get the gondola afloat, and be ready to start at the instant, so that, if I should have to run for it, I can jump on board and be off in a moment."

Francis made his way quietly up to the little group of huts inhabited by the fishermen, but in none of them could he see any signs of life–no lights were visible, nor could he hear the murmur of voices. There were, he knew, other buildings scattered about on the island; but he had only the light of the stars to guide him, and, not knowing anything of the exact position of the houses, he thought it better to return to the boat.

"I can find no signs of them, Giuseppi."

"All the better, Messer Francisco. There are some sorts of game, which it is well for the safety of the hunter not to discover. I was very glad, I can tell you, when I heard your whistle, and made out your figure returning at a walk. Now you are back I will take an hour's nap, and I should advise you to do the same."

But Francis had no thought of sleep, and sat down at his end of the gondola, wondering over the adventure, and considering whether or not it would be worth while to follow it up another night. That it was a plot of some sort he had little doubt. There were always in Venice two parties, equally anxious perhaps for the prosperity of the republic, but differing widely as to the means by which that prosperity would be best achieved, and as to the alliances which would, in the long run, prove most beneficial to her. There were also needy and desperate men ready enough to take bribes from any who might offer them, and to intrigue in the interest of Padua or Ferrara, Verona, Milan, or Genoa–whichever might for the time be their paymasters.

Francis was English, but he had been long enough in Venice to feel a pride in the island city, and to be almost as keenly interested in her fortunes as were his companions and friends; and a certain sense of duty, mingled with his natural love of adventure, decided him to follow up the chance which had befallen him, and to endeavour to ascertain the nature of the plot which was, he had little doubt, being hatched at San Nicolo.

In a very few minutes the regular breathing of Giuseppi, who had curled himself up in the bottom of the boat, showed that he had gone to sleep; and he did not stir until, an hour and a half after the return of Francis, the latter heard the fall of footsteps approaching the gondola.

"Wake up, Giuseppi, here comes our fare!"

Francis stood up and stretched himself as the stranger came alongside, as if he too had been fast asleep.

"Take me back to the spot where I hailed you," the fare said briefly, as he stepped into the boat and threw himself back on the cushions, and without a word the lads dipped their oars in the water and the gondola glided away towards Venice.

Just as they reached the mouth of the Grand Canal, and were about to turn into it, a six-oared gondola shot out from under the point, and a voice called out:

"Stop, in the name of the republic, and give an account of yourselves!"

"Row on," the passenger exclaimed, starting up. "Ten ducats if you can set me safely on shore."

Had the lads been real gondoliers, it is probable that even this tempting offer would not have induced them to disregard the order from the galley, for they would have run no slight risk in so doing. But Francis had no desire to be caught, and perhaps imprisoned for a considerable time, until he was able to convince the council that his share of the night's work had been merely the result of a boyish freak. With two strokes of his oar, therefore, he swept the boat's head round, thereby throwing their pursuers directly astern of them; then he and Giuseppi threw their whole weight into the stroke, and the boat danced over the water at a pace very different to that at which it had hitherto proceeded.

But, fast as they went, the galley travelled somewhat faster, the rowers doing their utmost in obedience to the angry orders of their officer; and had the race been continued on a broad stretch of water, it would sooner or later have overhauled the gondola. But Francis was perfectly aware of this, and edged the boat away towards the end of the Piazzetta, and then, shooting her head round, dashed at full speed along the canal by the side of the ducal palace, the galley being at the time some forty yards behind.

"The first to the right," Francis said, and with scarce a pause in their speed, they turned off at right angles up the first canal they came to. Again and again they turned and twisted, regardless of the direction in which the canals took them, their only object being to gain on their pursuers, who lost considerably at each turn, being obliged always to check their speed, before arriving at each angle, to allow the boat to go round.

In ten minutes she was far behind, and they then abated their speed, and turned the boat's head in the direction in which they wished to go.

"By San Paolo," the stranger said, "that was well done! You are masters of your craft, and sent your boat along at a pace which must have astonished those fellows in that lumbering galley. I had no reason to fear them, but I do not care to be interfered with and questioned by these jacks-in-office of the republic."

A few minutes later they reached the place where he embarked, and as he got out he handed the money he had promised to Giuseppi.

"Next Thursday night," he said, "at half past ten."

"It seems a dangerous sort of service, signor," Giuseppi said hesitatingly. "It is no joke to disobey the officers of the republic, and next time we may not be so fortunate."

"It's worth taking a little risk when you are well paid," the other said, turning away, "and it is not likely we shall run against one of the state galleys another night."

"Home, now, Giuseppi," Francis said, "we can talk about it tomorrow. It's the best night's work you ever did in your life, and as I have had a grand excitement we are both contented."

During the next few days Francis debated seriously with himself whether to follow up the adventure; but he finally decided on doing so, feeling convinced that there could be no real danger, even were the boat seized by one of the state galleys; as his story, that he had gone into the matter simply to discover whether any plot was intended against the republic, would finally be believed, as it would be beyond the bounds of probability that a lad of his age could himself have been concerned in such a conspiracy. As to Giuseppi, he offered no remonstrance when Francis told him that he intended to go out to San Nicolo on the following Thursday, for the ten ducats he had received were a sum larger than he could have saved in a couple of years' steady work, and were indeed quite a fortune in his eyes. Another such a sum, and he would be able, when the time came, to buy a gondola of his own, to marry, and set up housekeeping in grand style. As for the danger, if Francis was willing to run it he could do the same; for after all, a few months' imprisonment was the worst that could befall him for his share in the business.

Before the day came Matteo Giustiniani told Francis a piece of news which interested him.

"You remember my cousin Maria Polani, whom we met the other evening on the Grand Canal?"

"Of course I do, Matteo. What of her?"

"Well, what do you think? Ruggiero Mocenigo, whom I pointed out to you on the Piazza–the man who had been banished for two years–has asked for her hand in marriage."

"He is not going to have it, I hope," Francis said indignantly. "It would be a shame, indeed, to give her to such a man as that."

"That is just what her father thought, Francisco, and he refused Ruggiero pretty curtly, and told him, I believe, he would rather see her in her grave than married to him; and I hear there was a regular scene, and Ruggiero went away swearing Polani should regret his refusal."

"I suppose your cousin does not care much about his threats," Francis said.

"I don't suppose he cares much about them," Matteo replied; "but Ruggiero is very powerfully connected, and may do him damage, not to speak of the chance of his hiring a bravo to stab him on the first opportunity. I know my father advised Polani to be very cautious where he went at night for a time. This fellow, Ruggiero, is a dangerous enemy. If he were to get Polani stabbed, it would be next to impossible to prove that it was his doing, however strong the suspicion might be; for mere suspicion goes for nothing against a man with his influence and connections. He has two near relations on the council, and if he were to burn down Polani's mansion, and to carry off Maria, the chances are against his being punished, if he did but keep out of the way for a few months."

As in England powerful barons were in the habit of waging private wars with each other, and the carrying off a bride by force was no very rare event, this state of things did not appear, to Francis, as outrageous as it would do to an English lad of the present day, but he shook his head.

"Of course one understands, Matteo, that everywhere powerful nobles do things which would be regarded as crimes if done by others; but, elsewhere, people can fortify their houses, and call out and arm their retainers, and stand on their guard. But that here, in a city like this, private feuds should be carried on, and men stabbed when unconscious of danger, seems to me detestable."

"Of course it isn't right," Matteo said carelessly, "but I don't know how you are going to put a stop to it; and after all, our quarrels here only involve a life or two, while in other countries nobles go to war with each other, and hundreds of lives, of people who have nothing to do with the quarrel, may be sacrificed."

This was a light in which Francis had hardly looked upon the matter before, and he was obliged to own that even private assassination, detestable as it was, yet caused much less suffering than feudal war. Still, he was not disposed entirely to give in to his friend's opinion.

"That is true, Matteo; but at the same time, in a war it is fair fighting, while a stab in the back is a cowardly business."

"It is not always fair fighting," Matteo replied. "You hear of castles being surprised, and the people massacred without a chance of resistance; of villages being burned, and the people butchered unresistingly. I don't think there is so much more fairness one way than the other. Polani knows he will have to be careful, and if he likes he can hire bravos to put Ruggiero out of the way, just as Ruggiero can do to remove him. There's a good deal to be said for both sides of the question."

Francis felt this was so, and that although he had an abhorrence of the Venetian method of settling quarrels, he saw that as far as the public were concerned, it was really preferable to the feudal method, of both parties calling out their retainers and going to war with each other, especially as assassinations played no inconsiderable part in the feudal struggles of the time.

On the Thursday night the gondola was in waiting at the agreed spot. Francis had thought it probable that the stranger might this time ask some questions as to where they lived and their usual place of plying for hire, and would endeavour to find out as much as he could about them, as they could not but suspect that he was engaged in some very unusual enterprise. He had therefore warned Giuseppi to be very careful in his replies. He knew that it was not necessary to say more, for Giuseppi had plenty of shrewdness, and would, he was sure, invent some plausible story without the least difficulty, possessing, as he did, plenty of the easy mendacity so general among the lower classes of the races inhabiting countries bordering on the Mediterranean. Their fare came down to the gondola a few minutes after the clock had tolled the half hour.

"I see you are punctual," he said, "which is more than most of you men are."

Francis was rowing the bow oar, and therefore stood with his back to the passenger, and was not likely to be addressed by him, as he would naturally turn to Giuseppi, who stood close behind him. As Francis had expected, as soon as they were out on the lagoon the passenger turned to his companion and began to question him.

"I cannot see your faces," he said; "but by your figures you are both young, are you not?"

"I am but twenty-two," Giuseppi said, "and my brother is a year younger."

"And what are your names?"

"Giovanni and Beppo Morani."

"And is this boat your own?"

"It is, signor. Our father died three years ago, leaving us his boat."

"And where do you usually ply?"

"Anywhere, signor, just as the fancy seizes us. Sometimes one place is good, sometimes another."

"And where do you live?"

"We don't live anywhere, signor. When night comes, and business is over, we tie up the boat to a post, wrap ourselves up, and go to sleep at the bottom. It costs nothing, and we are just as comfortable there as we should be on straw in a room."

"Then you must be saving money."

"Yes; we are laying money by. Some day, I suppose, we shall marry, and our wives must have homes. Besides, sometimes we are lazy and don't work. One must have some pleasure, you know."

"Would you like to enter service?"

"No, signor. We prefer being our own masters; to take a fare or leave it as we please."

"Your boat is a very fast one. You went at a tremendous rate when the galley was after us the other night."

"The boat is like others," Giuseppi said carelessly; "but most men can row fast when the alternative is ten ducats one way or a prison the other."

"Then there would be no place where I could always find you in the daytime if I wanted you?"

"No, signor; there would be no saying where we might be. We have sometimes regular customers, and it would not pay us to disappoint them, even if you paid us five times the ordinary fare. But we could always meet you at night anywhere, when you choose to appoint."

"But how can I appoint," the passenger said irritably, "if I don't know where to find you?"

Giuseppi was silent for a stroke or two.

"If your excellency would write in figures, half past ten or eleven, or whatever time we should meet you, just at the base of the column of the palace–the corner one on the Piazzetta–we should be sure to be there sometime or other during the day, and would look for it."

"You can read and write, then?" the passenger asked.

"I cannot do that, signor," Giuseppi said, "but I can make out figures. That is necessary to us, as how else could we keep time with our customers? We can read the sundials, as everyone else can; but as to reading and writing, that is not for poor lads like us."

The stranger was satisfied. Certainly every one could read the sundials; and the gondoliers would, as they said, understand his figures if he wrote them.

"Very well," he said. "It is probable I shall generally know, each time I discharge you, when I shall want you again; but should there be any change, I will make the figures on the base of the column at the corner of the Piazzetta, and that will mean the hour at which you are to meet me that night at the usual place."

Nothing more was said, until the gondola arrived at the same spot at which it had landed the passenger on the previous occasion.

"I shall be back in about the same time as before," the fare said when he alighted.

As he strode away into the darkness, Francis followed him. He was shoeless, for at that time the lower class seldom wore any protection to the feet, unless when going a journey over rough ground. Among the gondoliers shoes were unknown; and Francis himself generally took his off, for coolness and comfort, when out for the evening in his boat.

He kept some distance behind the man he was following, for as there were no hedges or inclosures, he could make out his figure against the sky at a considerable distance. As Francis had expected, he did not make towards the village, but kept along the island at a short distance from the edge of the water.

Presently Francis heard the dip of oars, and a gondola ran up on the sands halfway between himself and the man he was following. He threw himself down on the ground. Two men alighted, and went in the same direction as the one who had gone ahead.

Francis made a detour, so as to avoid being noticed by the gondoliers, and then again followed. After keeping more than a quarter of a mile near the water, the two figures ahead struck inshore. Francis followed them, and in a few minutes they stopped at a black mass, rising above the sand. He heard them knock, and then a low murmur, as if they were answering some question from within. Then they entered, and a door closed.

He moved up to the building. It was a hut of some size, but had a deserted appearance. It stood between two ridges of low sand hills, and the sand had drifted till it was halfway up the walls. There was no garden or inclosure round it, and any passerby would have concluded that it was uninhabited. The shutters were closed, and no gleam of light showed from within.

After stepping carefully round it, Francis took his post round the angle close to the door, and waited. Presently he heard footsteps approaching–three knocks were given on the door, and a voice within asked, "Who is there?"

The reply was, "One who is in distress."

The question came, "What ails you?"

And the answer, "All is wrong within."

Then there was a sound of bars being withdrawn, and the door opened and closed again.

There were four other arrivals. The same questions were asked and answered each time. Then some minutes elapsed without any fresh comers, and Francis thought that the number was probably complete. He lay down on the sand, and with his dagger began to make a hole through the wood, which was old and rotten, and gave him no difficulty in piercing it.

He applied his eye to the orifice, and saw that there were some twelve men seated round a table. Of those facing him he knew three or four by sight; all were men of good family. Two of them belonged to the council, but not to the inner Council of Ten. One, sitting at the top of the table, was speaking; but although Francis applied his ear to the hole he had made, he could hear but a confused murmur, and could not catch the words. He now rose cautiously, scooped up the sand so as to cover the hole in the wall, and swept a little down over the spot where he had been lying, although he had no doubt that the breeze, which would spring up before morning, would soon drift the light shifting sand over it, and obliterate the mark of his recumbent figure. Then he went round to the other side of the hut and bored another hole, so as to obtain a view of the faces of those whose backs had before been towards him.

One of these was Ruggiero Mocenigo. Another was a stranger to Francis, and some difference in the fashion of his garments indicated that he was not a Venetian, but, Francis thought, a Hungarian. The other three were not nobles. One of them Francis recognized, as being a man of much influence among the fishermen and sailors. The other two were unknown to him.

As upwards of an hour had been spent in making the two holes and taking observations, Francis thought it better now to make his way back to his boat, especially as it was evident that he would gain nothing by remaining longer. Therefore, after taking the same precautions as before, to conceal all signs of his presence, he made his way across the sands back to his gondola.

"Heaven be praised, you are back again!" Giuseppi said, when he heard his low whistle, as he came down to the boat. "I have been in a fever ever since I lost sight of you. Have you succeeded?"

"I have found out that there is certainly a plot of some sort being got up, and I know some of those concerned in it, but I could hear nothing that went on. Still, I have succeeded better than I expected, and I am well satisfied with the night's work."

"I hope you won't come again, Messer Francisco. In the first place, you may not always have the fortune to get away unseen. In the next place, it is a dangerous matter to have to do with conspiracies, whichever side you are on. The way to live long in Venice is to make no enemies."

"Yes, I know that, Giuseppi, and I haven't decided yet what to do in the matter."

A quarter of an hour later, their fare returned to the boat. This time they took a long detour, and, entering Venice by one of the many canals, reached the landing place without adventure. The stranger handed Giuseppi a ducat.

"I do not know when I shall want you again; but I will mark the hour, as agreed, on the pillar. Do not fail to go there every afternoon; and even if you don't see it, you might as well come round here at half past ten of a night. I may want you suddenly."

Before going to sleep that night, Francis thought the matter over seriously, and finally concluded that he would have no more to do with it. No doubt, by crossing over to San Nicolo in the daytime, he might be able to loosen a plank at the back of the hut, or to cut so large an opening that he could hear, as well as see, what was going on within; but supposing he discovered that a plot was on hand in favour of the enemies of Venice, such as Padua or Hungary, what was he to do next? At the best, if he denounced it, and the officers of the republic surrounded the hut when the conspirators were gathered there, arrested them, and found upon them, or in their houses, proofs sufficient to condemn them, his own position would not be enviable. He would gain, indeed, the gratitude of the republic; but as for rewards, he had no need of them. On the other hand, he would draw upon himself the enmity of some eight or ten important families, and all their connections and followers, and his life would be placed in imminent danger. They would be all the more bitter against him, inasmuch as the discovery would not have been made by accident, but by an act of deliberate prying into matters which concerned him in no way, he not being a citizen of the republic.

So far his action in the matter had been a mere boyish freak; and now that he saw it was likely to become an affair of grave importance, involving the lives of many persons, he determined to have nothing further to do with it.

Chapter 3: On The Grand Canal

Giuseppi, next morning, heard the announcement of the determination of Francis, to interfere no further in the matter of the conspiracy at San Nicolo, with immense satisfaction. For the last few nights he had scarcely slept, and whenever he dozed off, dreamed either of being tortured in dungeons, or of being murdered in his gondola; and no money could make up for the constant terrors which assailed him. In his waking moments he was more anxious for his employer than for himself, for it was upon him that the vengeance of the conspirators would fall, rather than upon a young gondolier, who was only obeying the orders of his master.

It was, then, with unbounded relief that he heard Francis had decided to go no more out to San Nicolo.

During the next few days Francis went more frequently than usual to the Piazza of Saint Mark, and had no difficulty in recognizing there the various persons he had seen in the hut, and in ascertaining their names and families. One of the citizens he had failed to recognize was a large contractor in the salt works on the mainland. The other was the largest importer of beasts for the supply of meat to the markets of the city.

Francis was well satisfied with the knowledge he had gained. It might never be of any use to him, but it might, on the other hand, be of importance when least expected.

As a matter of precaution he drew up an exact account of the proceedings of the two nights on the lagoons, giving an account of the meeting, and the names of the persons present, and placed it in a drawer in his room. He told Giuseppi what he had done.

"I do not think there is the least chance of our ever being recognized, Giuseppi. There was not enough light for the man to have made out our features. Still there is nothing like taking precautions, and if–I don't think it is likely, mind–but if anything should ever happen to me–if I should be missing, for example, and not return by the following morning–you take that paper out of my drawer and drop it into the Lion's Mouth. Then, if you are questioned, tell the whole story."

"But they will never believe me, Messer Francisco," Giuseppi said in alarm.

"They will believe you, because it will be a confirmation of my story; but I don't think that there is the least chance of our ever hearing anything further about it."

"Why not denounce them at once without putting your name to it," Giuseppi said. "Then they could pounce upon them over there, and find out all about it for themselves?"

"I have thought about it, Giuseppi, but there is something treacherous in secret denunciations. These men have done me no harm, and as a foreigner their political schemes do not greatly concern me. I should not like to think I had sent twelve men to the dungeons and perhaps to death."

"I think it's a pity you ever went there at all, Messer Francisco."

"Well, perhaps it is, Giuseppi; but I never thought it would turn out a serious affair like this. However, I do wish I hadn't gone now; not that I think it really matters, or that we shall ever hear anything more of it. We may, perhaps, some day see the result of this conspiracy, that is, if its objects are such as I guess them to be; namely, to form a party opposed to war with Hungary, Padua, or Genoa."

For some days after this Francis abstained from late excursions in the gondola. It was improbable that he or Giuseppi would be recognized did their late passenger meet them. Still, it was possible that they might be so; and when he went out he sat quietly among the cushions while Giuseppi rowed, as it would be a pair-oared gondola the stranger would be looking for. He was sure that the conspirator would feel uneasy when the boat did not come to the rendezvous, especially when they found that, on three successive days, figures were marked as had been arranged on the column at the corner of the Piazzetta.

Giuseppi learned indeed, a week later, that inquiries had been made among the gondoliers for a boat rowed by two brothers, Giovanni and Beppo; and the inquirer, who was dressed as a retainer of a noble family, had offered five ducats reward for information concerning it. No such names, however, were down upon the register of gondoliers licensed to ply for hire. Giuseppi learned that the search had been conducted quietly but vigorously, and that several young gondoliers who rowed together had been seen and questioned.

The general opinion, among the boatmen, was that some lady must have been carried off, and that her friends were seeking for a clue as to the spot to which she had been taken.

One evening Francis had been strolling on the Piazza with Matteo, and had remained out later than he had done since the night of his last visit to San Nicolo. He took his seat in the gondola, and when Giuseppi asked him if he would go home, said he would first take a turn or two on the Grand Canal as the night was close and sultry.

There was no moon now, and most of the gondolas carried torches. Giuseppi was paddling quietly, when a pair-oared gondola shot past them, and by the light of the torch it carried, Francis recognized the ladies sitting in it to be Maria and Giulia Polani with their duenna; two armed retainers sat behind them. They were, Francis supposed, returning from spending the evening at the house of some of their friends. There were but few boats now passing along the canal.

Polani's gondola was a considerable distance ahead, when Francis heard a sudden shout of, "Mind where you are going!"

Then there was a crash of two gondolas striking each other, followed by an outburst of shouts and cries of alarm, with, Francis thought, the clash of swords.

"Row, Giuseppi!" he exclaimed, leaping from his seat and catching up the other oar; and with swift and powerful strokes the two lads drove the gondola towards the scene of what was either an accident, or an attempt at crime.

They had no doubt which it was when they arrived at the spot. A four-oared gondola lay alongside that of the Polanis, and the gondoliers with their oars, and the two retainers with their swords, had offered a stout resistance to an armed party who were trying to board her from the other craft, but their resistance was well nigh over by the time Francis brought his gondola alongside.

One of the retainers had fallen with a sword thrust through his body, and a gondolier had been knocked overboard by a blow from an oar. The two girls were standing up screaming, and the surviving retainer was being borne backwards by three or four armed men, who were slashing furiously at him.

"Quick, ladies, jump into my boat!" Francis exclaimed as he came alongside, and, leaning over, he dragged them one after the other into his boat, just as their last defender fell.

With a fierce oath the leader of the assailants was about to spring into the gondola, when Francis, snatching up his oar, smote him with all his strength on the head as he was in the act of springing, and he fell with a heavy splash into the water between the boats.

A shout of alarm and rage rose from his followers, but the gondolas were now separated, and in another moment that of Francis was flying along the canal at the top of its speed.

"Calm yourselves, ladies," Francis said. "There is no fear of pursuit. They will stop to pick up the man I knocked into the canal, and by the time they get him on board we shall be out of their reach."

"What will become of the signora?" the eldest girl asked, when they recovered a little from their agitation.

"No harm will befall her, you may be sure," Francis said. "It was evidently an attempt to carry you off, and now that you have escaped they will care nothing for your duenna. She seemed to have lost her head altogether, for as I lifted you into the boat she clung so fast to your garments that I fancy a portion of them were left in her grasp."

"Do you know where to take us? I see you are going in the right direction?" the girl asked.

"To the Palazzo Polani," Francis said. "I have the honour of being a friend of your cousin, Matteo Giustiniani, and being with him one day when you passed in your gondola, he named you to me."

"A friend of Matteo!" the girl repeated in surprise. "Pardon me, signor, I thought you were two passing gondoliers. It was so dark that I could not recognize you; and, you see, it is so unusual to see a gentleman rowing."

"I am English, signora, and we are fond of strong exercise, and so after nightfall, when it cannot shock my friends, I often take an oar myself."

"I thank you, sir, with all my heart, for my sister and myself, for the service you have rendered us. I can hardly understand what has passed, even now it seems like a dream. We were going quietly along home, when a large dark gondola dashed out from one of the side canals, and nearly ran us down. Our gondolier shouted to warn them, but they ran alongside, and then some men jumped on board, and there was a terrible fight, and every moment I expected that the gondola would have been upset. Beppo was knocked overboard, and I saw old Nicolini fall; and then, just as it seemed all over, you appeared suddenly by our side, and dragged us on board this boat before I had time to think."

"I am afraid I was rather rough, signora, but there was no time to stand on ceremony. Here is the palazzo."

The boat was brought up by the side of the steps. Francis leapt ashore and rang the bell, and then assisted the girls to land. In a minute the door was thrown open, and two servitors with torches appeared. There was an exclamation of astonishment as they saw the young ladies alone with a strange attendant.

"I will do myself the honour of calling tomorrow to inquire if you are any the worse for your adventure, signora."

"No, indeed," the eldest girl said. "You must come up with us and see our father. We must tell him what has happened; and he will be angry indeed, did we suffer our rescuer to depart without his having an opportunity of thanking him."

Francis bowed and followed the girls upstairs. They entered a large, very handsomely furnished apartment where a tall man was sitting reading.

"Why, girls," he exclaimed as he rose, "what has happened? you look strangely excited. Where is your duenna? and who is this young gentleman who accompanies you?"

"We have been attacked, father, on our way home," both the girls exclaimed.

"Attacked?" Signor Polani repeated. "Who has dared to venture on such an outrage?"

"We don't know, father," Maria said. "It was a four-oared gondola that ran suddenly into us. We thought it was an accident till a number of men, with their swords drawn, leaped on board. Then Nicolini and Francia drew their swords and tried to defend us, and Beppo and Jacopo both fought bravely too with their oars; but Beppo was knocked overboard, and I am afraid Nicolini and Francia are killed, and in another moment they would have got at us, when this young gentleman came alongside in his gondola, and dragged us on board, for we were too bewildered and frightened to do anything. One of them–he seemed the leader of the party–tried to jump on board, but our protector struck him a terrible blow with his oar, and he fell into the water, and then the gondola made off, and, so far as we could see, they did not chase us."

"It is a scandalous outrage, and I will demand justice at the hands of the council.

"Young sir, you have laid me under an obligation I shall never forget. You have saved my daughter from the worst calamity that could befall her. Who is it to whom I am thus indebted?"

"My name is Francis Hammond. My father is an English merchant who has, for the last four years, established himself here."

"I know him well by repute," Polani said. "I trust I shall know more of him in the future.

"But where is your duenna, girls?"

"She remained behind in the gondola, father; she seemed too frightened to move."

"The lady seemed to have lost her head altogether," Francis said. "As I was lifting your daughters into my gondola, in a very hasty and unceremonious way–for the resistance of your servitors was all but overcome, and there was no time to be lost–she held so tightly to their robes that they were rent in her hands."

Signor Polani struck a gong.

"Let a gondola be manned instantly," he said, "and let six of you take arms and go in search of our boat. Let another man at once summon a leech, for some of those on board are, I fear, grievously wounded, if not killed."

But there was no occasion to carry out the order concerning the boat, for before it was ready to start the missing gondola arrived at the steps, rowed by the remaining gondolier. The duenna was lifted out sobbing hysterically, and the bodies of the two retainers were then landed. One was dead; the other expired a few minutes after being brought ashore.

"You did not observe anything particular about the gondola, Maria, or you, Giulia?"

"No, father, I saw no mark or escutcheon upon it, though they might have been there without my noticing them. I was too frightened to see anything; it came so suddenly upon us."

"It was, as far as I noticed, a plain black gondola," Francis said. "The men concerned in the affair were all dressed in dark clothes, without any distinguishing badges."

"How was it you came to interfere in the fray, young gentleman? Few of our people would have done so, holding it to be a dangerous thing, for a man to mix himself up in a quarrel in which he had no concern."

"I should probably have mixed myself up in it, in any case, when I heard the cry of women," Francis replied; "but, in truth, I recognized the signoras as their gondola passed mine, and knew them to be cousins of my friend Matteo Giustiniani. Therefore when I heard the outcry ahead, I naturally hastened up to do what I could in the matter."

"And well you did it," Polani said heartily. "I trust that the man you felled into the water is he who is the author of this outrage. I do not think I need seek far for him. My suspicions point very strongly in one direction, and tomorrow I will lay the matter before the council and demand reparation."

"And now, signor, if you will permit me I will take my leave," Francis said. "The hour is late, and the signoras will require rest after their fright and emotion."

"I will see you tomorrow, sir. I shall do myself the honour of calling early upon your father, to thank him for the great service you have rendered me."

Signor Polani accompanied Francis to the steps, while two servants held torches while he took his seat in the gondola, and remained standing there until the barque had shot away beyond the circle of light.

"We seem fated to have adventures, Giuseppi."

"We do indeed, Messer Francisco, and this is more to my liking than the last. We arrived just at the nick of time; another half minute and those young ladies would have been carried off. That was a rare blow you dealt their leader. I fancy he never came up again, and that that is why we got away without being chased."

"I am of that opinion myself, Giuseppi."

"If that is the case we shall not have heard the last of it, Messer Francisco. Only someone of a powerful family would venture upon so bold a deed, as to try to carry off ladies of birth on the Grand Canal, and you may find that this adventure has created for you enemies not to be despised."

"I can't help it if it has," Francis said carelessly. "On the other hand, it will gain for me an influential friend in Signor Polani, who is not only one of the richest merchants of Venice, but closely related to a number of the best families of the city."

"His influence will not protect you against the point of a dagger," Giuseppi said. "Your share in this business cannot but become public, and I think that it would be wise to give up our evening excursions at present."

"I don't agree with you, Giuseppi. We don't go about with torches burning, so no one who meets us is likely to recognize us. One gondola in the dark is pretty much like another, and however many enemies I had, I should not be afraid of traversing the canals."

The next morning, at breakfast time, Francis related to his father his adventure of the previous evening.

"It is a mistake, my son, to mix yourself up in broils which do not concern you; but in the present instance it may be that your adventure will turn out to be advantageous to your prospects. Signor Polani is one of the most illustrious merchants of Venice. His name is known everywhere in the East, and there is not a port in the Levant where his galleys do not trade. The friendship of such a man cannot but be most useful to me.

"Upon the other hand, you will probably make some enemies by your interference with the plans of some unscrupulous young noble, and Venice is not a healthy city for those who have powerful enemies; still I think that the advantages will more than balance the risk.

"However, Francis, you must curb your spirit of adventure. You are not the son of a baron or count, and the winning of honour and glory by deeds of arms neither befits you, nor would be of advantage to you in any way. A trader of the city of London should be distinguished for his probity and his attention to business; and methinks that, ere long, it will be well to send you home to take your place in the counting house under the eye of my partner, John Pearson.

"Hitherto I have not checked your love for arms, or your intercourse with youths of far higher rank than your own; but I have been for some time doubting the wisdom of my course in bringing you out here with me, and have regretted that I did not leave you in good hands at home. The events of last night show that the time is fast approaching when you can no longer be considered a boy, and it will be better for you to turn at once into the groove in which you are to travel, than to continue a mode of life which will unfit you for the career of a city trader."

Francis knew too well his duty towards his father to make any reply, but his heart sank at the prospect of settling down in the establishment in London. His life there had not been an unpleasant one, but he knew that he should find it terribly dull, after the freedom and liberty he had enjoyed in Venice. He had never, however, even to himself, indulged the idea that any other career, save that of his father, could be his; and had regarded it as a matter of course that, some day, he would take his place in the shop in Cheapside.

Now that it was suddenly presented to him as something which would shortly take place, a feeling of repugnance towards the life came over him. Not that he dreamt for a moment of trying to induce his father to allow him to seek some other calling. He had been always taught to consider the position of a trader of good standing, of the city of London, as one of the most desirable possible. The line between the noble and the citizen was so strongly marked that no one thought of overstepping it. The citizens of London were as proud of their position and as tenacious of their rights as were the nobles themselves. They were ready enough to take up arms to defend their privileges and to resist oppression, whether it came from king or noble; but few indeed, even of the wilder spirits of the city, ever thought of taking to arms as a profession.

It was true that honour and rank were to be gained, by those who rode in the train of great nobles to the wars, but the nobles drew their following from their own estates, and not from among the dwellers in the cities; and, although the bodies of men-at-arms and archers, furnished by the city to the king in his wars, always did their duty stoutly in the field, they had no opportunity of distinguishing themselves singly. The deeds which attracted attention, and led to honour and rank, were performed by the esquires and candidates for the rank of knighthood, who rode behind the barons into the thick of the French chivalry.

Therefore Francis Hammond had never thought of taking to the profession of arms in his own country; though, when the news arrived in Venice of desperate fighting at sea with the Genoese, he had thought, to himself, that the most glorious thing in life must be to command a well-manned galley, as she advanced to the encounter of an enemy superior in numbers. He had never dreamed that such an aspiration could ever be satisfied–it was merely one of the fancies in which lads so often indulge.

Still, the thought that he was soon to return and take his place in the shop in Chepe was exceedingly unpleasant to him.

Soon after breakfast the bell at the water gate rang loudly, and a minute later the servant entered with the news that Signor Polani was below, and begged an interview. Mr. Hammond at once went down to the steps to receive his visitor, whom he saluted with all ceremony, and conducted upstairs.

"I am known to you by name, no doubt, Signor Hammond, as you are to me," the Venetian said, when the first formal greetings were over. "I am not a man of ceremony, nor, I judge, are you; but even if I were, the present is not an occasion for it. Your son has doubtless told you of the inestimable service, which he rendered to me last night, by saving my daughters, or rather my eldest daughter–for it was doubtless she whom the villains sought–from being borne off by one of the worst and most disreputable of the many bad and disreputable young men of this city."

"I am indeed glad, Signor Polani, that my son was able to be of service to you. I have somewhat blamed myself that I have let him have his own way so much, and permitted him to give himself up to exercises of arms, more befitting the son of a warlike noble than of a peaceful trader; but the quickness and boldness, which the mastery of arms gives, was yesterday of service, and I no longer regret the time he has spent, since it has enabled him to be of aid to the daughters of Signor Polani."

"A mastery of arms is always useful, whether a man be a peace-loving citizen, or one who would carve his way to fame by means of his weapons. We merchants of the Mediterranean might give up our trade, if we were not prepared to defend our ships against the corsairs of Barbary, and the pirates who haunt every inlet and islet of the Levant now, as they have ever done since the days of Rome. Besides, it is the duty of every citizen to defend his native city when attacked. And lastly, there are the private enemies, that every man who rises but in the smallest degree above his fellows is sure to create for himself.

"Moreover, a training in arms, as you say, gives readiness and quickness, it enables the mind to remain calm and steadfast amidst dangers of all sorts, and, methinks, it adds not a little to a man's dignity and self respect to know that he is equal, man to man, to any with whom he may come in contact. Here in Venice we are all soldiers and sailors, and your son will make no worse merchant, but rather the better, for being able to wield sword and dagger.

"Even now," he said with a smile, "he has proved the advantage of his training; for, though I say it not boastfully, Nicholas Polani has it in his power to be of some use to his friends, and foremost among them he will henceforward count your brave son, and, if you will permit him, yourself.

"But you will, I trust, excuse my paying you but a short visit this morning, for I am on my way to lay a complaint before the council. I have already been round to several of my friends, and Phillipo Giustiniani and some six others, nearest related to me, will go with me, being all aggrieved at this outrage to a family nearly connected. I crave you to permit me to take your son with me, in order that he may be at hand, if called upon, to say what he knows of the affair."

"Assuredly it is his duty to go with you if you desire it; although I own I am not sorry that he could see, as he tells me, no badge or cognizance which would enable him to say aught which can lead to the identification of those who would have abducted your daughter. It is but too well known a fact that it is dangerous to make enemies in Venice, for even the most powerful protection does not avail against the stab of a dagger."

"That is true enough," the merchant said. "The frequency of assassinations is a disgrace to our city; nor will it ever be put down until some men of high rank are executed, and the seignory show

that they are as jealous of the lives of private citizens, as they are of the honour and well being of the republic."

Francis gladly threw aside his books when he was told that Signor Polani desired him to accompany him, and was soon seated by the side of the merchant in his gondola.

"How old are you, my friend?" the merchant asked him, as the boat threaded the mazes of the canals.

"I am just sixteen, signor."

"No more!" the merchant said in surprise. "I had taken you for well-nigh two years older. I have but just come from the Palazzo Giustiniani, and my young kinsman, Matteo, tells me that in the School of Arms there are none of our young nobles who are your match with rapier or battleaxe."

"I fear, sir," Francis said modestly, "that I have given up more time to the study of arms than befits the son of a sober trader."

"Not at all," the Venetian replied. "We traders have to defend our rights and our liberties, our goods and our ships, just as much as the nobles have to defend their privileges and their castles. Here in Venice there are no such distinctions of rank as there are elsewhere. Certain families, distinguished among the rest by their long standing, wealth, influence, or the services they have rendered to the state, are of senatorial rank, and constitute our nobility; but there are no titles among us. We are all citizens of the republic, with our rights and privileges, which cannot be infringed even by the most powerful; and the poorest citizen has an equal right to make himself as proficient in the arms, which he may be called upon to wield in defence of the state, as the Doge himself. In your country also, I believe, all men are obliged to learn the use of arms, to practise shooting at the butts, and to make themselves efficient, if called upon to take part in the wars of the country. And I have heard that at the jousts, the champions of the city of London have ere now held their own against those of the court."

"They have done so," Francis said; "and yet, I know not why, it is considered unseemly for the sons of well-to-do citizens to be too fond of military exercises."

"The idea is a foolish one," the Venetian said hotly. "I myself have, a score of times, defended my ships against corsairs and pirates, Genoese, and other enemies. I have fought against the Greeks, and been forced to busy myself in more than one serious fray in the streets of Constantinople, Alexandria, and other ports, and have served in the galleys of the state. All men who live by trade must be in favour of peace; but they must also be prepared to defend their goods, and the better able they are to do it, the more the honour to them.

"But here we are at the Piazzetta."

A group of nobles were standing near the landing place, and Signor Polani at once went up to them, and introduced Francis to them as the gentleman who had done his daughter and their kinswoman such good service. Francis was warmly thanked and congratulated by them all.

"Will you wait near the entrance?" Signor Polani said. "I see that my young cousin, Matteo, has accompanied his father, and you will, no doubt, find enough to say to each other while we are with the council."

The gentlemen entered the palace, and Matteo, who had remained respectfully at a short distance from the seniors, at once joined his friend.

"Well, Francis, I congratulate you heartily, though I feel quite jealous of you. It was splendid to think of your dashing up in your gondola, and carrying off my pretty cousins from the clutches of that villain, Ruggiero Mocenigo, just as he was about to lay his hands on them."

"Are you sure it was Ruggiero, Matteo?"

"Oh, there can't be any doubt about it. You know, he had asked for Maria's hand, and when Polani refused him, had gone off muttering threats. You know what his character is. He is capable of any evil action; besides, they say that he has dissipated his patrimony, in gaming and other extravagances at Constantinople, and is deep in the hands of the Jews. If he could have succeeded

in carrying off Maria it would more than have mended his fortunes, for she and her sister are acknowledged to be the richest heiresses in Venice. Oh, there is not a shadow of doubt that it's he.

"You won't hear me saying anything against your love of prowling about in that gondola of yours, since it has brought you such a piece of good fortune–for it is a piece of good fortune, Francis, to have rendered such a service to Polani, to say nothing of all the rest of us who are connected with his family. I can tell you that there are scores of young men of good birth in Venice, who would give their right hand to have done what you did."

"I should have considered myself fortunate to have been of service to any girls threatened by violence, though they had only been fishermen's daughters," Francis said; "but I am specially pleased because they are relatives of yours, Matteo."

"To say nothing to their being two of the prettiest girls in Venice," Matteo added slyly.

"That counts for something too, no doubt," Francis said laughing, "though I didn't think of it.

"I wonder," he went on gravely, "whether that was Ruggiero whom I struck down, and whether he came up again to the surface. He has very powerful connections, you know, Matteo; and if I have gained friends, I shall also have gained enemies by the night's work."

"That is so," Matteo agreed. "For your sake, I own that I hope that Ruggiero is at present at the bottom of the canal. He was certainly no credit to his friends; and although they would of course have stood by him, I do not think they will feel, at heart, in any way displeased to know that he will trouble them no longer. But if his men got him out again, I should say you had best be careful, for Ruggiero is about the last man in Venice I should care to have as an enemy. However, we won't look at the unpleasant side of the matter, and will hope that his career has been brought to a close."

"I don't know which way to hope," Francis said gravely. "He will certainly be a dangerous enemy if he is alive; and yet the thought of having killed a man troubles me much."

"It would not trouble me at all if I were in your place," Matteo said. "If you had not killed him, you may be very sure that he would have killed you, and that the deed would have caused him no compunction whatever. It was a fair fight, just as if it had been a hostile galley in mid-sea; and I don't see why the thought of having rid Venice of one of her worst citizens need trouble you in any way."

"You see I have been brought up with rather different ideas to yours, Matteo. My father, as a trader, is adverse to fighting of all kinds–save, of course, in defence of one's country; and although he has not blamed me in any way for the part I took, I can see that he is much disquieted, and indeed speaks of sending me back to England at once."

"Oh, I hope not!" Matteo said earnestly. "Hitherto you and I have been great friends, Francis, but we shall be more in future. All Polani's friends will regard you as one of themselves; and I was even thinking, on my way here, that perhaps you and I might enter the service of the state together, and get appointed to a war galley in a few years."

"My father's hair would stand up at the thought, Matteo; though, for myself, I should like nothing so well. However, that could never have been. Still I am sorry, indeed, at the thought of leaving Venice. I have been very happy here, and I have made friends, and there is always something to do or talk about; and the life in London would be so dull in comparison. But here comes one of the ushers from the palace."

The official came up to them, and asked if either of them was Messer Francisco Hammond, and, finding that he had come to the right person, requested Francis to follow him.

Chapter 4: Carried Off

It was with a feeling of considerable discomfort, and some awe, that Francis Hammond followed his conductor to the chamber of the Council. It was a large and stately apartment. The decorations were magnificent, and large pictures, representing events in the wars of Venice, hung round the walls. The ceiling was also superbly painted. The cornices were heavily gilded. Curtains of worked tapestry hung by the windows, and fell behind him as he entered the door.

At a table of horseshoe shape eleven councillors, clad in the long scarlet robes, trimmed with ermine, which were the distinguishing dress of Venetian senators, were seated–the doge himself acting as president. On their heads they wore black velvet caps, flat at the top, and in shape somewhat resembling the flat Scotch bonnet. Signor Polani and his companions were seated in chairs, facing the table.

When Francis entered the gondolier was giving evidence as to the attack upon his boat. Several questions were asked him when he had finished, and he was then told to retire. The usher then brought Francis forward.

"This is Messer Francisco Hammond," he said.

"Tell your story your own way," the doge said.

Francis related the story of the attack on the gondola, and the escape of the ladies in his boat.

"How came you, a foreigner and a youth, to interfere in a fray of this kind?" one of the councillors asked.

"I did not stop to think of my being a stranger, or a youth," Francis replied quietly. "I heard the screams of women in distress, and felt naturally bound to render them what aid I could."

"Did you know who the ladies were?"

"I knew them only by sight. My friend Matteo Giustiniani had pointed them out to me, on one occasion, as being the daughters of Signor Polani, and connections of his. When their gondola had passed mine, a few minutes previously, I recognized their faces by the light of the torches in their boat."

"Were the torches burning brightly?" another of the council asked; "because it may be that this attack was not intended against them, but against some others."

"The light was bright enough for me to recognize their faces at a glance," Francis said, "and also the yellow and white sashes of their gondoliers."

"Did you see any badge or cognizance, either on the gondola or on the persons of the assailants?"

"I did not," Francis said. "They certainly wore none. One of the torches in the Polani gondola had been extinguished in the fray, but the other was still burning, and, had the gondoliers worn coloured sashes or other distinguishing marks, I should have noticed them."

"Should you recognize, were you to see them again, any of the assailants?"

"I should not," Francis said. "They were all masked."

"You say you struck down the one who appeared to be their leader with an oar, as he was about to leap into your boat. How was it the oar was in your hand instead of that of your gondolier?"

"I was myself rowing," Francis said. "In London, rowing is an amusement of which boys of all classes are fond, and since I have been out here with my father I have learned to row a gondola; and sometimes, when I am out of an evening, I take an oar as well as my gondolier, enjoying the exercise and the speed at which the boat goes along. I was not rowing when the signora's boat passed me, but upon hearing the screams, I stood up and took the second oar, to arrive as quickly as possible at the spot. That was how it was that I had it in my hand, when the man was about to leap into the boat."

"Then there is nothing at all, so far as you know, to direct your suspicion against anyone as the author of this attack?"

"There was nothing," Francis said, "either in the gondola itself, or in the attire or persons of those concerned in the fray, which could give me the slightest clue as to their identity."

"At any rate, young gentleman," the doge said, "you appear to have behaved with a promptness, presence of mind, and courage–for it needs courage to interfere in a fray of this sort–beyond your years; and, in the name of the republic, I thank you for having prevented the commission of a grievous crime. You will please to remain here for the present. It may be that, when the person accused of this crime appears before us, you may be able to recognize his figure."

It was with mixed feelings that Francis heard, a minute or two later, the usher announce that Signor Ruggiero Mocenigo was without, awaiting the pleasure of their excellencies.

"Let him enter," the doge said.

The curtains fell back, and Ruggiero Mocenigo entered with a haughty air. He bowed to the council, and stood as if expecting to be questioned.

"You are charged, Ruggiero Mocenigo," the doge said, "with being concerned in an attempt to carry off the daughters of Signor Polani, and of taking part in the killing of three servitors of that gentleman."

"On what grounds am I accused?" Ruggiero said haughtily.

"On the ground that you are a rejected suitor for the elder lady's hand, and that you had uttered threats against her father, who, so far as he knows, has no other enemies."

"This seems somewhat scanty ground for an accusation of such gravity," Ruggiero said sneeringly. "If every suitor who grumbles, when his offer is refused, is to be held responsible for every accident which may take place in the lady's family, methinks that the time of this reverend and illustrious council will be largely occupied."

"You will remember," the doge said sternly, "that your previous conduct gives good ground for suspicion against you. You have already been banished from the state for two years for assassination, and such reports as reached us of your conduct in Constantinople, during your exile, were the reverse of satisfactory. Had it not been so, the prayers of your friends, that your term of banishment might be shortened, would doubtless have produced their effect."

"At any rate," Ruggiero said, "I can, with little difficulty, prove that I had no hand in any attempt upon Signor Polani's daughters last night, seeing that I had friends spending the evening with me, and that we indulged in play until three o'clock this morning–an hour at which, I should imagine, the Signoras Polani would scarcely be abroad."

"At what time did your friends assemble?"

"At nine o'clock," Ruggiero said. "We met by agreement in the Piazza, somewhat before that hour, and proceeded together on foot to my house."

"Who were your companions?"

Ruggiero gave the names of six young men, all connections of his family, and summonses were immediately sent for them to attend before the council.

"In the meantime, Messer Francisco Hammond, you can tell us whether you recognize in the accused one of the assailants last night."

"I cannot recognize him, your excellency," Francis said; "but I can say certainly that he was not the leader of the party, whom I struck with my oar. The blow fell on the temple, and assuredly there would be marks of such a blow remaining today."

As Francis was speaking, Ruggiero looked at him with a cold piercing glance, which expressed the reverse of gratitude for the evidence which he was giving in his favour, and something like a chill ran through him as he resumed his seat behind Signor Polani and his friends.

There was silence for a quarter of an hour. Occasionally the members of the council spoke in low tones to each other, but no word was spoken aloud, until the appearance of the first of the young men who had been summoned. One after another they gave their evidence, and all were unanimous in

declaring that they had spent the evening with Ruggiero Mocenigo, and that he did not leave the room, from the moment of his arrival there soon after nine o'clock, until they left him at two in the morning.

"You have heard my witnesses," Ruggiero said, when the last had given his testimony; "and I now ask your excellencies, whether it is right that a gentleman, of good family, should be exposed to a villainous accusation of this kind, on the barest grounds of suspicion?"

"You have heard the evidence which has been given, Signor Polani," the doge said. "Do you withdraw your accusation against Signor Mocenigo?"

"I acknowledge, your excellency," Signor Polani said, rising, "that Ruggiero Mocenigo has proved that he took no personal part in the affair, but I will submit to you that this in no way proves that he is not the author of the attempt. He would know that my first suspicion would fall upon him, and would, therefore, naturally leave the matter to be carried out by others, and would take precautions to enable him to prove, as he has done, that he was not present. I still maintain that the circumstances of the case, his threats to me, and the fact that my daughter will naturally inherit a portion of what wealth I might possess, and that, as I know and can prove, Ruggiero Mocenigo has been lately reduced to borrowing money of the Jews, all point to his being the author of this attempt, which would at once satisfy his anger against me, for having declined the honour of his alliance, and repair his damaged fortunes."

There were a few words of whispered consultation between the councillors, and the doge then said:

"All present will now retire while the council deliberates. Our decision will be made known to the parties concerned, in due time."

On leaving the palace, Signor Polani and his friends walked together across the Piazza, discussing the turn of events.

"He will escape," Polani said. "He has two near relations on the council, and however strong our suspicions may be, there is really no proof against him. I fear that he will go free. I feel as certain as ever that he is the contriver of the attempt; but the precautions he has taken seem to render it impossible to bring the crime home to him. However, it is no use talking about it any more, at present.

"You will, I hope, accompany me home, Signor Francisco, and allow me to present you formally to my daughters. They were too much agitated, last night, to be able to thank you fully for the service you had rendered them.

"Matteo, do you come with us."

Three days passed, and no decision of the council had been announced, when, early in the morning, one of the state messengers brought an order that Francis should be in readiness, at nine o'clock, to accompany him. At that hour a gondola drew up at the steps. It was a covered gondola, with hangings, which prevented any from seeing who were within. Francis took his seat by the side of the official, and the gondola started at once.

"It looks very much as if I was being taken as a prisoner," Francis said to himself. "However, that can hardly be, for even if Ruggiero convinced the council that he was wholly innocent of this affair, no blame could fall on me, for I neither accused nor identified him. However, it is certainly towards the prisons we are going."

The boat, indeed, was passing the Piazzetta without stopping, and turned down the canal behind, to the prisons in rear of the palace. They stopped at the water gate, close to the Bridge of Sighs, and Francis and his conductor entered. They proceeded along two or three passages, until they came to a door where an official was standing. A word was spoken, and they passed in.

The chamber they entered was bare and vaulted, and contained no furniture whatever, but at one end was a low stone slab, upon which something was lying covered with a cloak. Four of the members of the council were standing in a group, talking, when Francis entered. Signor Polani, with two of his friends, stood apart at one side of the chamber. Ruggiero Mocenigo also, with two of his companions, stood on the other side.

Francis thought that the demeanour of Ruggiero was somewhat altered from that which he had assumed at the previous investigation, and that he looked sullen and anxious.

"We have sent for you, Francisco Hammond, in order that you may, if you can, identify a body which was found last night, floating in the Grand Canal."

One of the officials stepped forward and removed the cloak, showing on the stone slab the body of a young man. On the left temple there was an extensive bruise, and the skin was broken.

"Do you recognize that body?"

"I do not recognize the face," Francis said, "and do not know that I ever saw it before."

"The wound upon the temple which you see, is it such as, you would suppose, would be caused by the blow you struck an unknown person, while he was engaged in attacking the gondola of Signor Polani?"

"I cannot say whether it is such a wound as would be caused by a blow with an oar," Francis said; "but it is certainly, as nearly as possible, on the spot where I struck the man, just as he was leaping, sword in hand, into my gondola."

"You stated, at your examination the other day, that it was on the left temple you struck the blow."

"I did so. I said at once that Signor Ruggiero Mocenigo could not have been the man who led the assailants, because had he been so he would assuredly have borne a mark from the blow on the left temple."

"Look at the clothes. Do you see anything there which could lead you to identify him with your assailant?"

"My assailant was dressed in dark clothes, as this one was. There was but one distinguishing mark that I noticed, and this is wanting here. The light of the torch fell upon the handle of a dagger in his girdle. I saw it but for a moment, but I caught the gleam of gems. It was only a passing impression, but I could swear that he carried a small gold or yellow metal-handled dagger, and I believe that it was set with gems, but to this I should not like to swear."

"Produce the dagger found upon the dead man," one of the council said to an official.

And the officer produced a small dagger with a fine steel blade and gold handle, thickly encrusted with gems.

"Is this the dagger?" the senator asked Francis.

"I cannot say that it is the dagger," Francis replied; "but it closely resembles it, if it is not the same."

"You have no doubt, I suppose, seeing that wound on the temple, the dagger found in the girdle, and the fact that the body has evidently only been a few days in the water, that this is the man whom you struck down in the fray on the canal?"

"No, signor, I have no doubt whatever that it is the same person."

"That will do," the council said. "You can retire; and we thank you, in the name of justice, for the evidence you have given."

Francis was led back to the gondola, and conveyed to his father's house. An hour later Signor Polani arrived.

"The matter is finished," he said, "I cannot say satisfactorily to me, for the punishment is wholly inadequate to the offence, but at any rate he has not got off altogether unpunished. After you left, we passed from the prison into the palace, and then the whole council assembled, as before, in the council chamber. I may tell you that the body which was found was that of a cousin and intimate of Ruggiero Mocenigo. The two have been constantly together since the return of the latter from Constantinople. It was found, by inquiry at the house of the young man's father, that he left home on the evening upon which the attack was committed, saying that he was going to the mainland, and might not be expected to return for some days.

"The council took it for granted, from the wound in his head, and the fact that a leech has testified that the body had probably been in the water about three days, that he was the man that was stunned by your blow, and drowned in the canal. Ruggiero urged that the discovery in no way affected him; and that his cousin had, no doubt, attempted to carry off my daughter on his own account. There was eventually a division among the council on this point, but Maria was sent for, and on being questioned, testified that the young man had never spoken to her, and that, indeed, she did not know him even by sight; and the majority thereupon came to the conclusion that he could only have been acting as an instrument of Ruggiero's.

"We were not in the apartment while the deliberation was going on, but when we returned the president announced that, although there was no absolute proof of Ruggiero's complicity in the affair, yet that, considering his application for my daughter's hand, his threats on my refusal to his request, his previous character, and his intimacy with his cousin, the council had no doubt that the attempt had been made at his instigation, and therefore sentenced him to banishment from Venice and the islands for three years."

"I should be better pleased if they had sent him back to Constantinople, or one of the islands of the Levant," Mr. Hammond said. "If he is allowed to take up his abode on the mainland, he may be only two or three miles away, which, in the case of a man of his description, is much too near to be pleasant for those who have incurred his enmity."

"That is true," Signor Polani agreed, "and I myself, and my friends, are indignant that he should not have been banished to a distance, where he at least would have been powerless for fresh mischief. On the other hand, his friends will doubtless consider that he has been hardly treated. However, as far as my daughters are concerned, I will take good care that he shall have no opportunity of repeating his attempt; for I have ordered them, on no account whatever, to be absent from the palazzo after the shades of evening begin to fall, unless I myself am with them; and I shall increase the number of armed retainers in the house, by bringing some of my men on shore from a ship which arrived last night in port. I cannot believe that even Ruggiero would have the insolence to attempt to carry them off from the house by force; but when one has to deal with a man like this, one cannot take too great precautions."

"I have already ordered my son, on no account, to be out after nightfall in the streets. In his gondola I do not mind, for unless the gondoliers wear badges, it is impossible to tell one boat from another after dark. Besides, as he tells me, his boat is so fast that he has no fear whatever of being overtaken, even if recognized and chased. But I shall not feel comfortable so long as he is here, and shall send him back to England on the very first occasion that offers."

"I trust that no such occasion may occur just yet, Signor Hammond. I should be sorry, indeed, for your son to be separated so soon from us. We must talk the matter over together, and perhaps between us we may hit on some plan by which, while he may be out of the reach of the peril he has incurred on behalf of my family, he may yet be neither wasting his time, nor altogether separated from us."

For the next fortnight Francis spent most of his time at the Palazzo Polani. The merchant was evidently sincere in his invitation to him to make his house his home; and if a day passed without the lad paying a visit, would chide him gently for deserting them. He himself was frequently present in the balcony, where the four young people–for Matteo Giustiniani was generally of the party–sat and chatted together, the gouvernante sitting austerely by, with at times a strong expression of disapproval on her countenance at their laughter and merriment, although–as her charges' father approved of the intimacy of the girls with their young cousin and this English lad–she could offer no open objections. In the afternoon, the party generally went for a long row in a four-oared gondola, always returning home upon the approach of evening.

To Francis this time was delightful. He had had no sister of his own; and although he had made the acquaintance of a number of lads in Venice, and had accompanied his father to formal

entertainments at the houses of his friends, he had never before been intimate in any of their families. The gaiety and high spirits of the two girls, when they were in the house, amused and pleased him, especially as it was in contrast to the somewhat stiff and dignified demeanour which they assumed when passing through the frequented canals in the gondola.

"I do not like that woman Castaldi," Francis said one evening as, after leaving the palazzo, Giuseppi rowed them towards the Palazzo Giustiniani, where Matteo was to be landed.

"Gouvernantes are not popular, as a class, with young men," Matteo laughed.

"But seriously, Matteo, I don't like her; and I am quite sure that, for some reason or other, she does not like me. I have seen her watching me, as a cat would watch a mouse she is going to spring on."

"Perhaps she has not forgiven you, Francisco, for saving her two charges, and leaving her to the mercy of their assailants."

"I don't know, Matteo. Her conduct appeared to me, at the time, to be very strange. Of course, she might have been paralysed with fright, but it was certainly curious the way she clung to their dresses, and tried to prevent them from leaving the boat."

"You don't really think, Francis, that she wanted them to be captured?"

"I don't know whether I should be justified in saying as much as that, Matteo, and I certainly should not say so to anyone else, but I can't help thinking that such was the case. I don't like her face, and I don't like the woman. She strikes me as being deceitful. She certainly did try to prevent my carrying the girls off and, had not their dresses given way in her hands, she would have done so. Anyhow, it strikes me that Ruggiero must have had some accomplice in the house. How else could he have known of the exact time at which they would be passing along the Grand Canal? For, that the gondola was in waiting to dash out and surprise them, there is no doubt.

"I was asking Signora Giulia, the other day, how it was they were so late, for she says that her father never liked their being out after dusk in Venice, though at Corfu he did not care how late they were upon the water. She replied that she did not quite know how it happened. Her sister had said, some time before, that she thought it was time to be going, but the gouvernante–who was generally very particular–had said that there was no occasion to hurry, as their father knew where they were, and would not be uneasy. She thought the woman must have mistaken the time, and did not know how late it was.

"Of course, this proves nothing. Still I own that, putting all the things together, I have my suspicions."

"It is certainly curious, Francisco, though I can hardly believe it possible that the woman could be treacherous. She has been for some years in the service of the family, and my cousin has every confidence in her."

"That may be, Matteo; but Ruggiero may have promised so highly that he may have persuaded her to aid him. He could have afforded to be generous, if he had been successful."

"There is another thing, by the bye, Francisco, which did not strike me at the time; but now you speak of it, may be another link in the chain. I was laughing at Maria about their screaming, and saying what a noise the three of them must have made, and she said, 'Oh, no! there were only two of us–Giulia and I screamed for aid at the top of our voices; but the signora was as quiet and brave as possible, and did not utter a sound.'"

"That doesn't agree, Matteo, with her being so frightened as to hold the girls tightly, and almost prevent their escape, or with the row she made, sobbing and crying, when she came back. Of course there is not enough to go upon; and I could hardly venture to speak of it to Signor Polani, or to accuse a woman, in whom he has perfect confidence, of such frightful treachery on such vague grounds of suspicion. Still I do suspect her; and I hope, when I go away from Venice, you will, as far as you can, keep an eye upon her."

"I do not know how to do that," Matteo said, laughing; "but I will tell my cousins that we don't like her, and advise them, in future, not on any account to stay out after dusk, even if she gives them

permission to do so; and if I learn anything more to justify our suspicions, I will tell my cousin what you and I think, though it won't be a pleasant thing to do. However, Ruggiero is gone now, and I hope we sha'n't hear anything more about him."

"I hope not, Matteo; but I am sure he is not the man to give up the plan he has once formed easily, any more than he is to forgive an injury.

"However, here we are at your steps. We will talk the other matter over another time. Anyhow, I am glad I have told you what I thought, for it has been worrying me. Now that I find you don't think my ideas about her are altogether absurd, I will keep my eyes more open than ever in future. I am convinced she is a bad one, and I only hope we may be able to prove it."

"You have made me very uncomfortable, Francisco," Matteo said as he stepped ashore; "but we will talk about it again tomorrow."

"We shall meet at your cousin's in the evening. Before that time, we had better both think over whether we ought to tell anyone our suspicions, and we can hold a council in the gondola on the way back."

Francis did think the matter over that night. He felt that the fact told him by Giulia, that the gouvernante had herself been the means of their staying out later than usual on the evening of the attack, added great weight to the vague suspicions he had previously entertained; and he determined to let the matter rest no longer, but that the next day he would speak to Signor Polani, even at the risk of offending him by his suspicions of a person who had been, for some years, in his confidence. Accordingly, he went in the morning to the palazzo, but found that Signor Polani was absent, and would not be in until two or three o'clock in the afternoon. He did not see the girls, who, he knew, were going out to spend the day with some friends.

At three o'clock he returned, and found that Polani had just come in.

"Why, Francisco," the merchant said when he entered, "have you forgotten that my daughters will be out all day?"

"No, signor, I have not forgotten that, but I wish to speak to you. I dare say you will laugh at me, but I hope you will not think me meddlesome, or impertinent, for touching upon a subject which concerns you nearly."

"I am sure you will not be meddlesome or impertinent, Francisco," Signor Polani said reassuringly, for he saw that the lad was nervous and anxious. "Tell me what you have to say, and I can promise you beforehand that, whether I agree with you or not in what you may have to say, I shall be in no way vexed, for I shall know you have said it with the best intentions."

"What I have to say, sir, concerns the Signora Castaldi, your daughters' gouvernante. I know, sir, that you repose implicit confidence in her; and your judgment, formed after years of intimate knowledge, is hardly likely to be shaken by what I have to tell you. I spoke to Matteo about it, and, as he is somewhat of my opinion, I have decided that it is, at least, my duty to tell you all the circumstances, and you can then form your own conclusions."

Francis then related the facts known to him. First, that the assailants of the gondola must have had accurate information as to the hour at which they would come along; secondly, that it was at the gouvernante's suggestion that the return had been delayed much later than usual; lastly, that when the attack took place, the gouvernante did not raise her voice to cry for assistance, and that she had, at the last moment, so firmly seized their dresses, that it was only by tearing the girls from her grasp that he had been enabled to get them into the boat.

"There may be nothing in all this," he said when he had concluded. "But at least, sir, I thought that it was right you should know it; and you will believe me, that it is only anxiety as to the safety of your daughters that has led me to speak to you."

"Of that I am quite sure," Signor Polani said cordially, "and you were perfectly right in speaking to me. I own, however, that I do not for a moment think that the circumstances are more than mere coincidences. Signora Castaldi has been with me for upwards of ten years. She has instructed and

trained my daughters entirely to my satisfaction. I do not say that she is everything that one could wish, but, then, no one is perfect, and I have every confidence in her fidelity and trustworthiness. I own that the chain you have put together is a strong one, and had she but lately entered my service, and were she a person of whom I knew but little, I should attach great weight to the facts, although taken in themselves they do not amount to much. Doubtless she saw that my daughters were enjoying themselves in the society of my friends, and in her kindness of heart erred, as she certainly did err, in allowing them to stay longer than she should have done.

"Then, as to her not crying out when attacked, women behave differently in cases of danger. Some scream loudly, others are silent, as if paralysed by fear. This would seem to have been her case. Doubtless she instinctively grasped the girls for their protection, and in her fright did not even perceive that a boat had come alongside, or know that you were a friend trying to save them. That someone informed their assailants of the whereabouts of my daughters, and the time they were coming home, is clear; but they might have been seen going to the house, and a swift gondola have been placed on the watch. Had this boat started as soon as they took their seat in the gondola on their return, and hastened, by the narrow canals, to the spot where their accomplices were waiting, they could have warned them in ample time of the approach of the gondola with my daughters.

"I have, as you may believe, thought the matter deeply over, for it was evident to me that the news of my daughters' coming must have reached their assailants beforehand. I was most unwilling to suspect treachery on the part of any of my household, and came to the conclusion that the warning was given in the way I have suggested.

"At the same time, Francisco, I thank you deeply for having mentioned to me the suspicions you have formed, and although I think that you are wholly mistaken, I certainly shall not neglect the warning, but shall watch very closely the conduct of my daughters' gouvernante, and shall take every precaution to put it out of her power to play me false, even while I cannot, for a moment, believe she would be so base and treacherous as to attempt to do so."

"In that case, signor, I shall feel that my mission has not been unsuccessful, however mistaken I may be, and I trust sincerely that I am wholly wrong. I thank you much for the kind way in which you have heard me express suspicions of a person in your confidence."

The gravity with which the merchant had heard Francis' story vanished immediately he left the room, and a smile came over his face.

"Boys are boys all the world over," he said to himself, "and though my young friend has almost the stature of a man, as well as the quickness and courage of one, and has plenty of sense in other matters, he has at once the prejudices and the romantic ideas of a boy. Had Signora Castaldi been young and pretty, no idea that she was treacherous would have ever entered his mind; but what young fellow yet ever liked a gouvernante, who sits by and works at her tambour frame, with a disapproving expression on her face, while he is laughing and talking with a girl of his own age. I should have felt the same when I was a boy. Still, to picture the poor signora as a traitoress, in the pay of that villain Mocenigo, is too absurd. I had the greatest difficulty in keeping my gravity when he was unfolding his story. But he is an excellent lad, nevertheless. A true, honest, brave lad, with a little of the bluffness that they say all his nation possess, but with a heart of gold, unless I am greatly mistaken."

At seven o'clock, Francis was just getting into his gondola to go round again to Signor Polani's, when another gondola came along the canal at the top of its speed, and he recognized at once the badge of the Giustiniani. It stopped suddenly as it came abreast of his own boat, and Matteo, in a state of the highest excitement, jumped from his own boat into that of Francis.

"What is the matter, Matteo? What has happened?"

"I have terrible news, Francisco. My cousins have both disappeared."

"Disappeared!" Francis repeated in astonishment "How have they disappeared?"

"Their father has just been round to see mine. He is half mad with grief and anger. You know they had gone to spend the day at the Persanis?"

"Yes, yes," Francis exclaimed; "but do go on, Matteo. Tell me all about it, quickly."

"Well, it seems that Polani, for some reason or other, thought he would go and fetch them himself, and at five o'clock he arrived there in his gondola, only to find that they had left two hours before. You were right, Francisco, it was that beldam Castaldi. She went with them there in the morning, and left them there, and was to have come in the gondola for them at six. At three o'clock she arrived, saying that their father had met with a serious accident, having fallen down the steps of one of the bridges and broken his leg, and that he had sent her to fetch them at once.

"Of course, they left with her instantly. Polani questioned the lackeys, who had aided them to embark. They said that the gondola was not one of his boats, but was apparently a hired gondola, with a closed cabin. The girls had stopped in surprise as they came down the steps, and Maria said, 'Why, this is not our gondola!'

"Castaldi replied, 'No, no; our own gondolas had both gone off to find and bring a leech, and as your father was urgently wanting you, I hailed the first passing boat. Make haste, dears, your father is longing for you.'

"So they got on board at once, and the gondola rowed swiftly away. That is all I know about it, except that the story was a lie, that their father never sent for them, and that up to a quarter of an hour ago they had not reached home."

Chapter 5: Finding A Clue

"This is awful, Matteo," Francis said, when his friend had finished his story. "What is to be done?"

"That is just the thing, Francisco. What is to be done? My cousin has been already to the city magistrates, to tell them what has taken place, and to request their aid in discovering where the girls have been carried to. I believe that he is going to put up a proclamation, announcing that he will give a thousand ducats to whomsoever will bring information which will enable him to recover the girls. That will set every gondolier on the canals on the alert, and some of them must surely have noticed a closed gondola rowed by two men, for at this time of year very few gondolas have their covers on. It seems to be terrible not to be able to do anything, so I came straight off to tell you."

"You had better send your gondola home, Matteo. It may be wanted. We will paddle out to the lagoon and talk it over. Surely there must be something to be done, if we could but think of it.

"This is terrible, indeed, Matteo," he repeated, after they had sat without speaking for some minutes. "One feels quite helpless and bewildered. To think that only yesterday evening we were laughing and chatting with them, and that now they are lost, and in the power of that villain Mocenigo, who you may be sure is at the bottom of it.

"By the way," he said suddenly, "do you know where he has taken up his abode?"

"I heard that he was at Botonda, near Chioggia, a week ago, but whether he is there still I have not the least idea."

"It seems to me that the thing to do is to find him, and keep him in sight. He will probably have them hidden away somewhere, and will not go near them for some time, for he will know that he will be suspected, and perhaps watched."

"But why should he not force Maria to marry him at once?" Matteo said. "You see, when he has once made her his wife he will be safe, for my cousin would be driven then to make terms with him for her sake."

"He may try that," Francis said; "but he must know that Maria has plenty of spirit, and may refuse to marry him, threaten her as he will. He may think that, after she has been kept confined for some time, and finds that there is no hope of escape, except by consenting to be his wife, she may give way. But in any case, it seems to me that the thing to be done is to find Ruggiero, and to watch his movements."

"I have no doubt my cousin has already taken steps in that direction," Matteo said, "and I feel sure that, in this case, he will receive the support of every influential man in Venice, outside the Mocenigo family and their connections. The carrying off of ladies, in broad daylight, will be regarded as a personal injury in every family. The last attempt was different. I do not say it was not bad enough, but it is not like decoying girls from home by a false message. No one could feel safe, if such a deed as this were not severely punished."

"Let us go back again, Matteo. It is no use our thinking of anything until we know what has really been done, and you are sure to be able to learn, at home, what steps have been taken."

On reaching home Matteo learned that Polani, accompanied by two members of the council, had already started in one of the swiftest of the state galleys for the mainland. A council had been hastily summoned, and, upon hearing Polani's narrative, had dispatched two of their number, with an official of the republic, to Botonda. If Ruggiero was found to be still there, he was to be kept a prisoner in the house in which he was staying, under the strictest watch. If he had left, orders were to be sent, to every town in the Venetian dominions on the mainland, for his arrest when discovered, and in that case he was to be sent a prisoner, strongly guarded, to Venice.

Other galleys had been simultaneously dispatched to the various ports, ordering a strict search of every boat arriving or leaving, and directing a minute investigation to be made as to the occupants of

every boat that had arrived during the evening or night. The fact that a thousand ducats were offered, for information which would lead to the recovery of the girls, was also to be published far and wide.

The news of the abduction had spread, and the greatest indignation was excited in the city. The sailors from the port of Malamocco came over in great numbers. They regarded this outrage on the family of the great merchant as almost a personal insult. Stones were thrown at the windows of the Palazzo Mocenigo, and an attack would have been made upon it, had not the authorities sent down strong guards to protect it. Persons belonging to that house, and the families connected with it, were assaulted in the streets, and all Venice was in an uproar.

"There is one comfort," Giuseppi said, when he heard from Francis what had taken place. "Just at present, Mocenigo will have enough to think about his own affairs without troubling about you. I have been in a tremble ever since that day, and have dreamed bad dreams every night."

"You are more nervous for me than I am for myself, Giuseppi; but I have been careful too, for although Ruggiero himself was away his friends are here, and active, too, as you see by this successful attempt. But I think that at present they are likely to let matters sleep. Public opinion is greatly excited over the affair, and as, if I were found with a stab in my back, it would, after what has passed, be put down to them, I think they will leave me alone."

"I do hope, father," Francis said at breakfast the next morning, "that there may be no opportunity of sending me back to England, until something is heard of the Polanis."

"I have somewhat changed my mind, Francis, as to that matter. After what Signor Polani said the other day, I feel that it would be foolish for me to adhere to that plan. With his immense trade and business connections he can do almost anything for you, and such an introduction into business is so vastly better than your entering my shop in the city, that it is best, in every way, that you should stay here for the present. Of course, for the time he will be able to think of nothing but his missing daughters; but at any rate, you can remain here until he has leisure to pursue the subject, and to state, further than he did the other day, what he proposes for you. My own business is a good one for a London trader, but it is nothing by the side of the transactions of the merchant princes at Venice, among the very first of whom Signor Polani is reckoned."

Francis was greatly pleased at his father's words. He had, ever since Polani had spoken to him, been pondering the matter in his mind. He knew that to enter business under his protection would be one of the best openings that even Venice could afford; but his father was slow to change his plans, and Francis greatly feared that he would adhere to his original plan.

"I was hoping, father, that you would think favourably of what Signor Polani said, although, of course, I kept silence, knowing that you would do what was best for me. And now I would ask you if you will, until this matter is cleared up, excuse me from my tasks. I should learn nothing did I continue at them, for my mind would be ever running upon Signor Polani's daughters, and I should be altogether too restless to apply myself. It seems to me, too, that I might, as I row here and there in my gondola, obtain some clue as to their place of concealment."

"I do not see how you could do that, Francis, when so many others, far better qualified than yourself, will be on the lookout. Still, as I agree with you that you are not likely to apply your mind diligently to your tasks, and as, indeed, you will shortly be giving them up altogether, I grant your request."

Polani returned in the evening to Venice. Ruggiero Mocenigo had been found. He professed great indignation at the accusation brought against him, of being concerned in the abduction of the ladies, and protested furiously when he heard that, until they were found, he was to consider himself a prisoner. Signor Polani considered that his indignation was feigned, but he had no doubt as to the reality of his anger at finding that he was to be confined to his house under a guard.

Immediately after his return, Polani sent his gondola for Francis. He was pacing up and down the room when the lad arrived.

"Your suspicions have turned out correct, as you see, Francis. Would to Heaven I had acted upon them at once, and then this would not have happened. It seemed to me altogether absurd, when you spoke to me, that the woman I have for years treated as a friend should thus betray me. And yet your warning made me uneasy, so much so that I set off myself to fetch them home at five o'clock, only to find that I was too late. I scarcely know why I have sent for you, Francis, except that as I have found, to my cost, that you were more clear sighted in this matter than I, I want to know what you think now, and whether any plan offering even a chance of success has occurred to you. That they have been carried off by the friends of Mocenigo I have no doubt whatever."

"I fear, signor," Francis said, "that there is little hope of my thinking of anything that has not already occurred to you. It seems to me hardly likely that they can be in the city, although, of course, they may be confined in the house of Mocenigo's agents. Still, they would be sure that you would offer large rewards for their discovery, and would be more likely to take them right away. Besides, I should think that it was Mocenigo's intention to join them, wherever they may be, as soon as he learned that they were in the hands of his accomplices. Your fortunate discovery that they had gone, so soon after they had been carried off, and your going straight to him armed with the order of the council, probably upset his calculations, for it is likely enough that his agents had not arrived at the house, and that he learned from you, for the first time, that his plans had succeeded. Had you arrived two or three hours later, you might have found him gone."

"That is what I calculated, Francisco. His agents had but four hours' start of me. They would, no doubt, carry the girls to the place of concealment chosen, and would then bear the news to him; whereas I, going direct in one of the state gondolas, might reach him before they did, and I feel assured that I did so.

"It was nigh midnight when I arrived, but he was still up, and I doubt not awaiting the arrival of the villains he had employed. My first step was to set a watch round the house, with the order to arrest any who might come and inquire for him. No one, however, came.

"The news, indeed, of the sudden arrival of a state galley, at that hour, had caused some excitement in the place, and his agents might well have heard of it upon their arrival. I agree with you in thinking they are not in the town, but this makes the search all the more difficult. The question is, what ought we to do next?"

"The reward that you have offered will certainly bring you news, signor, if any, save those absolutely concerned, have observed anything suspicious; but I should send to all the fishing villages, on the islets and on the mainland, to publish the news of the reward you have offered. Beyond that, I do not see that anything can be done; and I, too, have thought of nothing else since Matteo brought me the news of their being carried off. It will be of no use, that I can see, going among the fishermen and questioning them, because, with such a reward in view, it is certain that anyone who has anything to tell will come, of his own accord, to do so."

"I know that is the case already, Francisco. The authorities have been busy all day with the matter, and a score of reports as to closed gondolas being seen have reached them; but so far nothing has come of it. Many of these gondolas have been traced to their destinations, but in no case was there anything to justify suspicion. Happily, as long as Mocenigo is in confinement, I feel that no actual harm will happen to the girls; but the villain is as crafty as a fox, and may elude the vigilance of the officer in charge of him. I am going to the council, presently, to urge that he should be brought here as a prisoner; but from what I hear there is little chance of the request being complied with. His friends are already declaiming on the injustice of a man being treated as a criminal, when there is no shadow of proof forthcoming against him; and the disturbances last night have angered many who have no great friendship for him, but who are indignant at the attack of the populace upon the house of a noble. So you see that there is but faint chance that they would bring him hither a prisoner."

"I think, sir, that were I in your case, I should put some trusty men to watch round the house where he is confined; so that in case he should escape the vigilance of his guards they might seize upon him. Everything depends, as you say, upon his being kept in durance."

"I will do so, Francisco, at once. I will send to two of my officers at the port, and tell them to pick out a dozen men on whom they can rely, to proceed to Botonda, and to watch closely everyone who enters or leaves the house, without at the same time making themselves conspicuous. At any rate, they will be handy there in case Mocenigo's friends attempt to rescue him by force, which might be done with success, for the house he occupies stands at a short distance out of the town, and the official in charge of Mocenigo has only eight men with him.

"Yes, your advice is excellent, and I will follow it at once. Should any other idea occur to you, pray let me know it immediately. You saved my daughters once, and although I know there is no reason why it should be so, still, I feel a sort of belief that you may, somehow, be instrumental in their again being brought back to me."

"I will do my best, sir, you may depend upon it," Francis said earnestly. "Were they my own sisters, I could not feel more strongly interested in their behalf."

Francis spent the next week almost entirely in his gondola. Starting soon after daybreak with Giuseppi, he would row across to the villages on the mainland, and make inquiries of all sorts there; or would visit the little groups of fishermen's huts, built here and there on posts among the shallows. He would scan every house as he passed it, with the vague hope that a face might appear at the window, or a hand be waved for assistance. But, during all that time, he had found nothing which seemed to offer the slightest clue, nor were the inquiries set on foot by Signor Polani more successful. Every piece of information which seemed to bear, in the slightest degree, upon the affair was investigated, but in no case was it found of the slightest utility.

One evening he was returning late, tired by the long day's work, and discouraged with his utter want of success, when, just as he had passed under the Ponto Maggiore, the lights on the bridge fell on the faces of the sitters in a gondola coming the other way. They were a man and a woman. The latter was closely veiled. But the night was close and oppressive, and, just at the moment when Francis' eyes fell upon her, she lifted her veil for air. Francis recognized her instantly. For a moment he stopped rowing, and then dipped his oar in as before. Directly the other gondola passed through the bridge behind him, and his own had got beyond the circle of light, he swept it suddenly round.

Giuseppi gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Giuseppi, we have luck at last. Did you notice that gondola we met just now? The woman sitting in it is Castaldi, the woman who betrayed the signoras."

"What shall we do, Messer Francisco?" Giuseppi, who had become almost as interested in the search as his master, asked. "There was only a single gondolier and one other man. If we take them by surprise we can master them."

"That will not do, Giuseppi. The woman would refuse to speak, and though they could force her to do so in the dungeons, the girls would be sure to be removed the moment it was known she was captured. We must follow them, and see where they go to. Let us get well behind them, so that we can just make them out in the distance. If they have a suspicion that they are being followed, they will land her at the first steps and slip away from us."

"They are landing now, signor," Giuseppi exclaimed directly afterwards. "Shall we push on and overtake them on shore?"

"It is too late, Giuseppi. They are a hundred and fifty yards away, and would have mixed in the crowd, and be lost, long before we should get ashore and follow them. Row on fast, but not over towards that side. If the gondola moves off, we will make straight for the steps and try to follow them, though our chance of hitting upon them in the narrow lanes and turnings is slight indeed.

"But if, as I hope, the gondola stops at the steps, most likely they will return to it in time. So we will row in to the bank a hundred yards farther up the canal and wait."

The persons who had been seen in the gondola had disappeared when they came abreast of it, and the gondolier had seated himself in the boat, with the evident intention of waiting. Francis steered his gondola at a distance of a few yards from it as he shot past, but did not abate his speed, and continued to row till they were three or four hundred yards farther up the canal. Then he turned the gondola, and paddled noiselessly back until he could see the outline of the boat he was watching.

An hour elapsed before any movement was visible. Then Francis heard the sound of footsteps, and could just make out the figures of persons descending the steps and entering the gondola. Then the boat moved out into the middle of the canal, where a few boats were still passing to and fro. Francis kept his gondola close by the bank, so as to be in the deep shade of the houses. The boat they were following again passed under the Ponto Maggiore, and for some distance followed the line of the Grand Canal.

"Keep your eye upon it, Giuseppi. It is sure to turn off one way or the other soon, and if it is too far ahead of us when it does so, then it may give us the slip altogether."

But the gondola continued its course the whole length of the canal, and then straight on until, nearly opposite Saint Mark's, it passed close to a larger gondola, with four rowers, coming slowly in the other direction; and it seemed to Francis that the two boats paused when opposite each other, and that a few words were exchanged.

Then the boat they were watching turned out straight into the lagoon. It was rather lighter here than in the canal, bordered on each side by houses, and Francis did not turn the head of his gondola for a minute or two.

"It will be very difficult to keep them in sight out here without their making us out," Giuseppi said.

"Yes, and it is likely enough that they are only going out there in order that they may be quite sure that they are not followed, before striking off to the place they want to go to. They may possibly have made us out, and guess that we are tracking them. They would be sure to keep their eyes and ears open."

"I can only just make them out now, Messer Francisco, and as we shall have the buildings behind us, they will not be able to see us as well as we can see them. I think we can go now."

"We will risk it, at any rate, Giuseppi. I have lost sight of them already, and it will never do to let them give us the slip."

They dipped their oars in the water, and the gondola darted out from the shore. They had not gone fifty strokes when they heard the sound of oars close at hand.

"To the right, Giuseppi, hard!" Francis cried as he glanced over his shoulder.

A sweep with both oars brought the gondola's head, in a moment, almost at right angles to the course that she had been pursuing; and the next sent her dancing on a new line, just as a four-oared gondola swept down upon them, missing their stern by only three or four feet. Had they been less quick in turning, the iron prow would have cut right through their light boat.

Giuseppi burst into a torrent of vituperation at the carelessness of the gondoliers who had so nearly run into them, but Francis silenced him at once.

"Row, Giuseppi. It was done on purpose. It is the gondola the other spoke to."

Their assailant was turning also, and in a few seconds was in pursuit. Francis understood it now. The gondola they had been following had noticed them, and had informed their friends, waiting off Saint Mark's, of the fact. Intent upon watching the receding boat, he had paid no further attention to the four-oared craft, which had made a turn, and lay waiting in readiness to run them down, should they follow in the track of the other boat.

Francis soon saw that the craft behind them was a fast one, and rowed by men who were first-rate gondoliers. Fast as his own boat was flying through the water, the other gained upon them steadily. He was heading now for the entrance to the Grand Canal, for their pursuer, in the wider sweep he had made in turning, was nearer to the Piazza than they were, and cut off their flight in that direction.

"Keep cool, Giuseppi," he said. "They will be up to us in a minute or two. When their bow is within a yard or two of us, and I say, 'Now!' sweep her head straight round towards the lagoon. We can turn quicker than they can. Then let them gain upon us, and we will then turn again."

The gondola in pursuit came up hand over hand. Francis kept looking over his shoulder, and when he saw its bow gliding up within a few feet of her stern he exclaimed "Now!" and, with a sudden turn, the gondola again swept out seaward.

Their pursuer rushed on for a length or two before she could sweep round, while a volley of imprecations and threats burst from three men who were standing up in her with drawn swords. Francis and Giuseppi were now rowing less strongly, and gaining breath for their next effort. When the gondola again came up to them they swept round to the left, and as their pursuers followed they headed for the Grand Canal.

"Make for the steps of Santa Maria church. We will jump out there and trust to our feet."

The two lads put out all their strength now. They were some three boats' lengths ahead before their pursuers were fairly on their track. They were now rowing for life, for they knew that they could hardly succeed in doubling again, and that the gondola behind them was so well handled, that they could not gain on it at the turnings were they to venture into the narrow channels. It was a question of speed alone, and so hard did they row that the gondola in pursuit gained but slowly on them, and they were still two lengths ahead when they dashed up to the steps of the church.

Simultaneously they sprang on shore, leaped up the steps, and dashed off at the top of their speed, hearing, as they did so, a crash as the gondola ran into their light craft. There was a moment's delay, as the men had to step across their boat to gain the shore, and they were fifty yards ahead before they heard the sound of their pursuers' feet on the stone steps; but they were lightly clad and shoeless, and carried nothing to impede their movements, and they had therefore little fear of being overtaken.

After racing on at the top of their speed for a few minutes, they stopped and listened. The sound of their pursuers' footsteps died away in the distance; and, after taking a few turns to put them off their track, they pursued their way at a more leisurely pace.

"They have smashed the gondola," Giuseppi said with a sob, for he was very proud of the light craft.

"Never mind the gondola," Francis said cheerfully. "If they had smashed a hundred it would not matter."

"But the woman has got away and we have learned nothing," Giuseppi said, surprised at his master's cheerfulness.

"I think we have learned something, Giuseppi. I think we have learned everything. I have no doubt the girls are confined in that hut on San Nicolo. I wonder I never thought of it before; but I made so sure that they would be taken somewhere close to where Mocenigo was staying, that it never occurred to me that they might hide them out there. I ought to have known that that was just the thing they would do, for while the search would be keen among the islets near the land, and the villages there, no one would think of looking for them on the seaward islands.

"I have no doubt they are there now. That woman came ashore to report to his friends, and that four-oared boat which has chased us was in waiting off Saint Mark's, to attack any boat that might be following them.

"We will go to Signor Polani at once and tell him what has happened. I suppose it is about one o'clock now, but I have not noticed the hour. It was past eleven before we first met the gondola, and we must have been a good deal more than an hour lying there waiting for them."

A quarter of an hour's walking took them to the palazzo of Polani. They rang twice at the bell at the land entrance, before a face appeared at the little window of the door, and asked who was there.

"I wish to see Signor Polani at once," Francis said.

"The signor retired to rest an hour ago," the man said.

"Never mind that," Francis replied. "I am Francis Hammond, and I have important news to give him."

As soon as the servitor recognized Francis' voice, he unbarred the door.

"Have you news of the ladies?" he asked eagerly.

"I have news which will, I hope, lead to something," Francis replied.

A moment later the voice of Polani himself, who, although he had retired to his room, had not yet gone to sleep, was heard at the top of the grand stairs, inquiring who it was who had come so late; for although men had been arriving all day, with reports from the various islands and villages, he thought that no one would come at this hour unless his news were important.

Francis at once answered:

"It is I, Signor Polani, Francis Hammond. I have news which I think may be of importance, although I may be mistaken. Still, it is certainly news that may lead to something."

The merchant hurried down.

"What is it, Francisco? What have you learned?"

"I have seen the woman Castaldi, and have followed her. I do not know for certain where she was going, for we have been chased by a large gondola, and have narrowly escaped with our lives. Still, I have a clue to their whereabouts."

Francis then related the events of the evening.

"But why did you not run into the boat and give the alarm at once, Francisco? Any gondolas passing would have given their assistance, when you declared who she was, for the affair is the talk of the city. If that woman were in our power we should soon find means to make her speak."

"Yes, signor; but the moment she was known to be in your power, you may be sure that they would remove your daughters from the place where they have been hiding them. I thought, therefore, the best plan would be to track them. No doubt we should have succeeded in doing so, had it not been for the attack upon us by another gondola."

"You are right, no doubt, Francisco. Still, it is unfortunate, for I do not see that we are now any nearer than we were before, except that we know that this woman is in the habit of coming into the city."

"I think we are nearer, sir, for I had an adventure some time ago that may afford a clue to their hiding place."

He then told the merchant how he had, one evening, taken a man out to San Nicolo, and had discovered that a hut in that island was used as a meeting place by various persons, among whom was Ruggiero Mocenigo.

"I might have thought of the place before, signor; but, in fact, it never entered my mind. From the first, we considered it so certain that the men who carried off your daughters would take them to some hiding place where Mocenigo could speedily join them, that San Nicolo never entered my mind. I own that it was very stupid, for it seems now to me that the natural thing for them to do, would be to take them in the very opposite direction to that in which the search for them would be made."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.