

La Serenissima
A Tale of Venice

It was towards the end of—60, when one night an English king's messenger reached Mestre, waiting to cross over to Venice. Sir John Hawser—such was his name—was young, brave and very highly connected, and as such perhaps, he had been chosen by the ministry to convey some trifling message to King George III's representative in that town. He reached Venice just before dawn; and after a hurried toilet and a still more hurried breakfast, Sir John delivered his packet, and began exploring the lanes and alleys of this incomprehensible town.

Thoroughly enjoying the freedom of walking after his long journey by coach and gondola, Sir John indulged his rambling propensities to the full extent. Whilst he was doing so a crowd collected in front of the Ducal Palace.

While pushing and elbowing his way in the crowd some clever pick-pocket robbed him of his lace handkerchief. He would have been less angry if it had happened in London; the pickpockets there were so clever that there was no shame in being their victim; but to have been plundered by a clumsy Venetian was too much for his equanimity, and he burst out in a torrent of abuse. Speaking mostly in Italian, but mixing a few English anathemas in his speech, he related his loss to a few bystanders, and was advised by them to complain to the police, or rather to those officials who under the Serenissima fulfilled the present duties of the police. Though without great faith in this plan, he followed it, and gave notice to the authorities.

For three or four days afterwards, he continued visiting the principal monuments and churches, but without receiving any further information about his lace handkerchief. Sir John was young and brave; as a consequence, he was impetuous and fiery; whilst being born and bred in a free-thinking, free-speaking country, he was apt to express his thoughts as they came to his mind without reflection and without fear. It is not surprising, therefore, that one night, under the arcades of the Procuratie, while relating his loss to a few friends, he should have said what he thought of the vaunted secret police of Venice. They were, he said, a lot of stupid fools, very pompous and very stately, trying to hide their ignorance and incapacity under very high-sounding phrases; but the meanest London detective was worth the whole lot of them. As to the Secret Council, he did not believe it existed at all; or if it did, it was no better than the rest.

His friends, astonished by this sudden outburst, attributed it at first to those last glasses of vino santo they had been drinking together; but knowing full well the jealous care the Serenissima had of its reputation, they instinctively shrank from him as from a dangerous man. Availing themselves of favorable opportunities, they disappeared round dark corners, down side alleys; and very soon Sir John found himself alone.

Alone! At least, so he thought; but a silent figure had been following him for some time and was now eagerly and stealthily dogging him. So carefully it walked, so noiselessly it stepped, that for a long time Sir John did not notice this unwelcome shadow, and even when he did he attached no importance to it. But at last he began to feel some doubts about this follower. Nothing could be guessed from his appearance. Completely wrapped up in a dark cloak, and with a wide hat

shading and concealing the upper part of his face, the man would not have been recognized by his own brother.

Fearless still, but somewhat annoyed, Sir John pursued his way through the maze of alleys that led from the piazza to his temporary home. Determined to try to throw off his masked companion, he quickened at his first step; but at the next turning a glance back showed that it was no use. Having by this time reached the Ponte San Moise—one of the innumerable bridges that cross the minor canals of Venice—he stopped on its steps to see what the shadow would do. Astonished at first by this new ruse, the man hesitated a second, but a second only, and then disappeared in the shadow of the church. Our hero vainly strained his eyes in trying to find out whether he had really gone, or whether he was only hiding behind the columns and watching. He certainly began to feel an intense interest in this new chase, in which he seemed to be the game hunted down. Then, convinced that he had seen the last of his silent friend, he decided on continuing his way home; and was just going to move, when a cloak was thrown over his head and chest, completely gagging him, whilst several strong arms entwined themselves round his body and effectually pinioned him. Before he could recover his sense, a voice whispered in Italian, in his ear: “You are a prisoner of Serenissima; resistance is of no use.”

Even after those words, the import of which he dimly guessed, Sir John would have tried to strike one blow at least for his life or for his liberty; but the cloak in which he had been wrapped up was so artistically and so securely fastened that he could not move a muscle nor utter a cry. There was no help for it, and he doggedly awaited his fate. The voices round him seemed to hold a short conference, and then they lifted him from the ground, and carrying him to a short distance, deposited him in what he felt to be a gondola. The journey was not long, though to him it seemed an age, and very soon the rocking motion ceased. They evidently had reached their destination. A few seconds more and he was landed in the same unceremonious manner.

After depriving him of his sword and securing his hands, his captors released him from the folds of the mantle in which he had been almost choked. He found himself in a very small passage, dimly lighted and intensely damp. The low ceiling, the strong stone walls, the massive iron doors that lined it, reminded him at once of all he had heard and read about the State prisons of Venice, and his heart sank within him. Without, however, giving him much time for reflection, or asking him any questions, his captors opened one of the cells, thrust him in and bolted the door. Left alone in the most absolute darkness, he groped about as well as his tied hands would allow him until he found a stone bench, on which he dropped, completely unmanned by the novelty and the horror of his position. He had heard of prisoners being kept in these State prisons for months, even for years without light, with just enough of the coarsest food to keep them alive, and without a shadow of a judgement. Others had been tried and executed within these dark walls, and their friends outside had never known their fate. Was he too going to disappear without a struggle from this world? Was his body going to be dropped into the Canal grande? Or was to he linger in his cell until his youth, his strength, and perhaps his mind was gone, to be released only as a wreck of his former self, as a warning to others?

After a very long time, of which he could not even guess the length, he distinctly heard a noise as of bolts and keys at his prison-door; suddenly it opened and a flood of light illuminated every corner of his dismal cell. Dazzled at first by the glare of the torches, he could not see the men by

whom they were carried; but gradually, as his eyes grew accustomed to the light, he saw they were all armed, all masked, and all dressed in black. In the meantime his hands had been released of their fetters, and his guards had quietly surrounded him. Without a word, without a sound, they led him on in their midst. Through dark halls and narrow staircases, through crooked passages and low beetling doors they marched as noiselessly as a group of ghosts surrounding a mortal man. At last their goal is reached; a door is flung open, and Sir John is ushered into a spacious room. At one end, on a raised platform, sit ten judges, all masked, all draped in large black cloaks. By their side, but a little lower down, are the scribes of this silent tribunal. Judges and scribes as motionless as if they had been statues, and not human beings. The first glimpses of dawn struggling through the painted windows, powerless as yet to supersede the wax candles, gave to the whole scene the most weird aspect. Outside, all was sleeping; and no sound reached the inmates of this hall to remind them that a powerful city, a numerous population, surrounded their silent abode.

As soon as the several actors in this strange scene had reached their proper places, a man still masked, and dressed in the same dark hue, began in a monotonous slow tone to give his evidence. Though muffled by the folds of his mask, his voice was peculiarly distinct and clear, and Sir John at once knew it as being the same he had heard when he was arrested. Cold and pitiless as steel, without a tremor and without a pause, the voice repeated all the words used by the culprit when, in his rash burst of passion he had derided and mocked the knowledge and power of the Serenissima. Slowly and regularly the words followed each other as the links of a lengthened chain, as steadily as the drops of rain on a winter's day. The pens of the scribes, creaking as they hurried over the paper, made fit accompaniment to this recital. Except for them all was as motionless, as still as if no human hearts were beating under those silk black mantles. It ended at last, and with a sense of relief Sir John strained his senses to see, to hear what should follow.

After a short pause, the judge who sat at the center of the table stood up and addressed him in these terms: "You have heard the evidence against you; now follow us and hear your sentence."

No cross-examination, no defense was allowed by the laws of this Council. Rising together as if moved by a single mind, the funeral procession followed its leader, and left the hall by the door through which Sir John has entered it. Again through the same winding passages, again down the same narrow steps, silently and noiselessly they glided like ghosts returning to their graves. Surrounded by his guards, Sir John followed immediately after the last of the judges, wondering all the time what was to be his fate. When they had reached the lowest floor of the building, and were nearing again the loathsome cell from which he had so lately been taken, the cortege divided, and Sir John was brought face to face with the senior judge.

"You have insulted the Serenissima; you have denied its power of punishing crime, because you had been robbed of a paltry handkerchief, and it had not been immediately found and given back to you. Now look!" As he said these last words, the masked judge stepped on one side and directed Sir John's gaze to a darker corner of the dark passage. There, hanging against the wall, the rope that encircled his neck disappearing through the stone, was the corpse of a man.

Entranced by this sight, and thinking that perhaps he was also going to be hanged in the same manner by an unseen hand, Sir John felt rooted to the spot.

After a short silence, the judge continued: “This man was the thief; in his right hand you will find your handkerchief. Take it. As for you, we ought not perhaps to be so lenient; but in consideration of your youth and of the high position you hold in your country, we will overlook your fault. You are forgiven. Outside this gate a gondola waits for you—it will take you to Mestre, and thence you will be conveyed to the frontier. Go! But remember always what you have seen to-night.”

Seizing with a trembling hand the lace handkerchief that had been the cause of so much trouble, Sir John wanted to speak, wanted to thank his unknown judge; but before he could recover his voice the phantoms had disappeared, and two jailers only were by his side. Without a word, and apparently without an effort, these two men opened up a secret door leading to the canal, and helped the now liberated man into a gondola that was moored to the steps, an in the fore part of which lay his luggage. No word was said, no order was given; the two gondoliers seemed to know their duty, and they silently paddled away from the palace in which Sir John had spent that dreadful night. At Mestre a coach was waiting for him. In a few hours the frontier was crossed. Then only did he begin to breathe freely. But for a long time afterwards he avoided any allusion to his Venetian adventure; and for many years he could not bear to speak of it—[Chambers’ Journal. [sic]

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