

BOTTEGHE OSCVRE

THE WILLIAMS CONGDON FOUNDATION

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FOUR VENETIAN SKETCHES

MURDER IN VENICE

It is now about 6 o'clock this evening and no one seems to be remembering what happened this morning. The vaporettos pass my window, people looking up at the palaces, across the canal to others, looking for some intimacy on a step or a terrace. Students sing, sitting together on the back deck of the vaporetto; a young man talks closely to a girl at the window inside. Perhaps they take no warning from what passion can do. The barges row laboriously as usual, and call warnings as they turn the corner at my window. Gondolas are carrying the usual passengers, their suitcases piled behind them, new arrivals as always at this time. At 5:08 the train arrives from Rome each day.

My padrone di casa just came in to ask me for a 2 months advance in rent, and I asked him if he knew what had happened this morning. « Strange », I said to the servant girl who was scrubbing the stairway, « that those who were there seemed to be so much a part of it almost as to be actually involved. One woman stood », I said, « at her door describing the details right at the spot where it happened. The ticket sellers at the vaporetto station at the Salute repeated the story to each other over and over again for the benefit of passengers. I thought that everyone in the city had heard by now. And yet », I was still talking to the serving girl, « here you are only

500 yards from where it happened and you hadn't heard ». « We'll read it in the paper to-morrow », she said.

It's always fun to tell an Italian of such a thing because even if he has heard, he will hear it again as if for the first time. And who knows if it is the first time he's hearing it; I was telling the padrone of the restaurant where I eat at noon-time, and was glad he would let me tell him. The boy waiter had heard but maybe he just hadn't bothered to tell anyone. He confirmed it, yes, and for a moment it was news for all but then the man said, « well, we'll read it in the paper to-morrow ». And the garden filled with its usual clients, some choosing tables in the shade, others in the half shade.

« What a funny thing, they take it all so naturally », I said to an American friend, « a child, listening to his grandmother tell a neighbor, 'drowned' said the grandmother, 'no, shot', said the child ».

Signora Giovanna was just going in to my friend's gateway as I came along this morning around 10 o'clock. « The rheumatism is so bad that I couldn't sleep all night » she said. « Injections? I'm so full of punctures now ». « Then there's only God to turn to », I suggested, as we both entered my friend's garden. « And I prayed to Him all night when I couldn't sleep », she said, « for you, for everyone, for peace, and for health ». As I left her to go up the steps she called to me, « you've heard? » « What? » I said, and when she told me I said, « I don't believe it, it can't be as simple as that ».

« Nino saw it », the maid said to me as I was sitting in the sun; « ask him ». Nino was clipping a vine; I couldn't see him but I heard him singing. And how simply he told it. He had heard the shot, two shots it was, and there they were, lying there. « Imagine doing a thing like that to Venice, on a day like this in May », I said, « all the filth and the secrets and intrigue they would inflict on her, Venice ignores ». But what they had done was already happening to me.

FOUR VENETIAN SKETCHES

When I left my friend's house a little later I would take a vaporetto from the Salute to the Piazza. I knew that I would pass the spot, — the sottoportico of the Abazzia, they said, and I thought: just like a play, so much so, maybe that's why it happens so often in Venice — always on a set; people can't mean to do such things. Sottoporticos are made for darkness and for secrets, but at 10 o'clock in the morning, and on a bright day in May!

As I approached the corner before the sottoportico there was the woman explaining how she had heard it, — the 2 shots. «No, not a thing was found in his pockets». A policeman had been holding back the people from entering the passageway and now he began to motion us all on. A man was sluicing the pavement, scrubbing the spot which the Gazzettino reporter had just flash-fotoed. On the bridge at the far end of the tunnel people stood bending forward, all looking into the tunnel as though they were looking down the barrel of the gun itself.

And below the bridge, the gondola of the Blue Cross was just passing out into the Grand Canal, headed towards the Piazza and the Questura. To a questioning bargeman, the guard of the shuttered cabin held his palm, pillow-fashion, to his cheek, as though they were asleep.

From the bridge, all looked after the gondola. Yes, you could see them alright; they'd been put into the cabin head first and you could see the two pairs of feet, the man's and the woman's.

WINTER IN VENICE

I woke up vaguely in the night and somewhere in the back of my sleep bottles were casually, drunkenly lolling against each other, an unfamiliar sound but all the same I fell asleep again. More bottles, — I had lined them up by the door; cognac, wine and turpentine bottles, — and as the sound became more insistent I woke up again. I smelled

kerosene. It was still dark but as I looked from the bed, the floor seemed unfamiliarly close and shiny. I put on the light and there it was all around me, the Grand Canal up to my mattress.

My shoes were floating neatly side by side as I'd left them on the floor; the book I'd been reading before going to sleep was drifting beside them, still open to the page; my watch was where I'd left it on the rug, now below the water, and just ticking past 4 o'clock. Bottles were bobbing everywhere about, and the kerosene stove had overturned. My jacket, hung from the back of a chair, was up to its elbows in water. My suitcase, with letters and photographs, was half under water and this I decided to salvage first.

I had a rheumatic knee at this time which for some months had been wrapped in my scarf. The water must have been nearly up to my knees and the only alternative to taking the plunge was to stay in bed until the tide went down. But the water was still rising and I didn't think that the bed would float with me in it. So I fished up my watch and waded towards the suitcase. I lifted it and maneuvered down the watery corridor and poured the water out of the suitcase into the toilet, which was itself nearly under water. I then put the suitcase and my clothes, my bedding and my paintings to refuge atop the piled antiquities in the store room where the water was just up to the beard of an ancestor's bust.

Every time a boat went by on the canal the waves beat against my door; through the cracks, the wavelets came across the room and my knee was getting wetter. Thinking that water in free movement would penetrate less than through a water-soaked scarf, I took off the scarf. Now I worked my way to the bathroom again, — hardly a bathroom as there is no bath — and did my «bisogno» (as the Italians call one's necessity) but this was something of a risk as I was not sure if a toilet in a flood flushes up or down. I brushed my teeth and shaved, both of which seemed superfluous. Dressing was a simpler operation than usual as I didn't have to put on my shoes or trousers.

Every once in a while there was sudden laughter at my windows as someone rowed by and saw me, and now dawn was just breaking. Usually I can see only an oarsman's head but now whole bodies were framed in the windows as they passed, as though walking on the water. I could see that the water out on the Grand Canal was at the same level as that in my room. The wall of my house was an illusion; the Canal was in my room and the vaporetto, — or Canal trams, — were going over me as though I were swimming. Sandolinos, small boats, were out taxiing the stranded, and I hailed one. But before leaving I went to the door; it opened heavily and of course there was as much water outside, along the passage and in the courtyard, as there was in my room. Now should I lock the door? No, I thought, it might only keep the water in when the rest of the tide all over the city went down. I gave one last look behind before climbing out the window to the waiting sandolino. The armchair had tipped over by now, my bed had floated across the room, and the painting table, with its puddles of many colours looked like a garden in the middle of a pond.

I had always wanted to see the Piazza under water so we headed up the Grand Canal. At the vaporetto stations passengers were being carried for twenty-five lire pig-a-back along the ramps to the quays where sandolinos were waiting. The float from which summer tourists ascend to enter the Gritti Hotel was now higher than the door so that one would have to go down thigh deep into the watery lobby. The waves were beating into the Piazza from the lagoon around the pillars of the Doge's Palace, and the marble gargoyles on the steps beneath the two columns around which people crowd on summer Sundays were up to their elbows in water. The sea swirled down the loggias of the Piazza, under the red velvet seats of Florian's café and over the shelves of the glass and the lace shops. Under the arches waded the boys who had come over from the Giudecca island, trouserless now, looking to raid flooded shops. In front of the Basilica of St. Mark, a gondolier, up to his waist in the sea, was push-

ing his gondola across the Piazza. A newsreel cameraman in a rowboat was photographing a tourist who, with paint kit and canvas, huddling in a doorway of the church with the pigeons, was painting the Campanile which was now an island.

The bells rang; the church was flooded. A girl appeared at the far end of the piazza, her red skirt lifted above the water and the boys from the Giudecca waded towards her.

Venice no longer seemed a city sinking into the sea but to have come up in pieces from a long sea burial for the few hours of the highest tide in 40 years.

VENICE DAWN

«It's the wind, twice a day», he said, as we both felt it at the same moment, «once at 3 o'clock in the morning, and once at 9 o'clock at night: the beginning and the end of a day».

There are people about, but I don't know if they are night people, yesterday's people or to-morrow's morning people. A bell is ringing, merely a night hour or is it a first call to mass? Shoes squeak away — or are they squeaking towards — but there is already too much light for it to be yesterday's. A bird talks, sand falls from an old wall, a cat rustles, an ice box in a house snaps its rhythm. Two people approach — no, here there is too much activity for the dead of night.

I didn't want just to go to the Piazza. I know this alley, but what a new dimension. I can breathe and the posters breathe. I don't have to look at anyone. A boat sounds in the distance. A house clock strikes a sleeper's hour. If they turned off the lights in the piazza, then I'd know. I walk and even my string shoes echo on the steps of a bridge as on hollow iron.

See how the breeze increases the day. The glass of a window rattles. The cats are tired. Someone whistles; and this has the energy of a new day. Two men are walking

towards me. I can walk like them too, indifferent, because we are all veterans of a dream.

« If you are afraid », I said to myself, « then it is still night, isn't it? »

No, this is the hour when you don't have to look at anyone, to know anyone because we are already known to each other (at this hour).

My whisper fills the Piazza, more than all the tourists who talk in the day, or even the pigeons at feeding time. Of course it's to-morrow; it is already light enough for me to be thirsty. But if I go to bed now, when I wake up it will be still another day.

DEATH IN VENICE

It was late in the afternoon, the sun was already strong on the palaces across the canal, so strong that I was closing the shutters as I do every afternoon at this time except for the one beside my painting table. Just as I was closing one of the shutters, why didn't I notice a man swimming in the canal, or did I notice him? When I heard the screams and I rushed to open one of the shutters, then I knew I'd seen him, and there he was and swimming fast and with all his clothes on towards the steps. There was a motorboat tram stopped in the middle of the canal, keeling over with all the passengers on one side watching, and there was a crowd on the Accademia bridge. It was as though I had already known the children were there on the steps screaming down at the little head that was being sucked into the water, so close to them that the tallest could have reached in and pulled it out.

O my God there it is, — and everything went out of me, — who I was, what I was doing; there was nothing else, for me and for the rest. They were rowing now from everywhere, gondolas and barges and the man was still swimming, but is no one going to reach it in time? All Canal traffic had stopped except the boats that were racing towards the spot; — but

crawling, fixed in a dream. And now on the bridge they were screaming and all the heads in the windows of the palaces across from me, and I suppose on my side of the canal too, were looking down into the water where the child was still thrashing, or wasn't it? I couldn't look. I lowered the volume of my radio.

Then a gondola shattered the dream and swept in between the motorboat and the steps where the children were yelling; a speedboat from the palace next to me whipped across the canal, didn't look for traffic, it had all stopped, and it picked up the swimmer just as a passenger in the gondola lifted out the child, a doll it looked like, limp and dripping. He bent over it. Then he handed it to its parents, I suppose they were; they would have been there by now among all those people on the steps; everything happens at once in Italy.

Now people were already crossing the bridge, new people who had not seen, nor heard; boats moved on and one came around the corner from the Rialto and blew its horn impatiently. Two lovers came out on the empty steps. A gondola with tourists, their suitcases arranged neatly, passed the steps and the two quiet lovers were looking over the silent facades of the palaces.