

A VENETIAN NIGHT'S ENTERTAINMENT

Edith Wharton

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This is the story that, in the dining-room of the old Beacon Street house (now the Aldebaran Club), Judge Anthony Bracknell, of the famous East India firm of Bracknell Saulsbee, when the ladies had withdrawn to the oval parlour (and Maria's harp was throwing its gauzy web of sound across the Common), used to relate to his grandsons, about the year that Buonaparte marched upon Moscow.

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I

"Him Venice!" said the Lascar with the big earrings; and Tony Bracknell, leaning on the high gunwale of his father's East Indiaman, the Hepzibah B., saw far off, across the morning sea, a faint vision of towers and domes dissolved in golden air.

It was a rare February day of the year 1760, and a young Tony, newly of age, and bound on the grand tour aboard the crack merchantman of old Bracknell's fleet, felt his heart leap up as the distant city trembled into shape. VENICE! The name, since childhood, had been a magician's wand to him. In the hall of the old Bracknell house at Salem there hung a series of yellowing prints which Uncle Richard Saulsbee had brought home from one of his long voyages: views of heathen mosques and palaces, of the Grand Turk's Seraglio, of St. Peter's Church in Rome; and, in a corner—the corner nearest the rack where the old flintlocks hung—a busy merry populous scene, entitled: ST. MARK'S SQUARE IN VENICE. This picture, from the first, had singularly taken little Tony's fancy. His unformulated criticism on the others was that they lacked action. True, in the view of St. Peter's an experienced-looking gentleman in a full-bottomed wig was pointing out the fairly obvious monument to a bashful companion, who had presumably not ventured to raise his eyes to it; while, at the doors of the Seraglio, a group of turbaned infidels observed with less hesitancy the approach of a veiled lady on a camel. But in Venice so many things were happening at once—more, Tony was sure, than had ever happened in Boston in a twelve-month or in Salem in a long lifetime. For here, by their garb, were people of every nation on earth, Chinamen, Turks, Spaniards, and many more, mixed with a parti-coloured throng of gentry, lacqueys, chapmen, hucksters, and tall personages in parsons' gowns who stalked through the crowd with an air of mastery, a string of parasites at their heels. And all these people seemed to be diverting themselves hugely, chaffering with the hucksters, watching the antics of trained dogs and monkeys, distributing doles to maimed beggars or having their pockets picked by slippery-looking fellows in black—the whole with such an air of ease and good-humour that one felt the cut-purses to be as much a part of the show as the tumbling acrobats and animals.

As Tony advanced in years and experience this childish mumming lost its magic; but not so the early imaginings it had excited. For the old picture had been but the spring-board of fancy, the first step of a cloud-ladder leading to a land of dreams. With these dreams the name of Venice remained associated; and all that observation or report subsequently brought him concerning the place seemed, on a sober warranty of fact, to confirm its claim to stand midway between reality and illusion. There was, for instance, a slender Venice glass, gold-powdered as with lily-pollen or the dust of sunbeams, that, standing in the corner cabinet betwixt two Lowestoft caddies, seemed, among its lifeless neighbours, to palpitate like an impaled butterfly. There was, farther, a gold chain of his mother's, spun of that same sun-pollen, so thread-like, impalpable, that it slipped through the fingers like light, yet so strong that it carried a heavy pendant which seemed held in air as if by magic. MAGIC! That was the word which the thought of Venice evoked. It was the kind of place, Tony felt, in which things elsewhere impossible might naturally happen, in which two and two might make five, a paradox elope with a syllogism, and a conclusion give the lie to its own premiss. Was there ever a young heart that did not, once and again, long to get away into such a world as that? Tony, at least, had felt the longing from the first hour when the axioms in his horn-book had brought home to him his heavy responsibilities as a Christian and a sinner. And now here was his wish taking shape before him, as the distant haze of gold shaped itself into towers and domes across the morning sea!

The Reverend Ozias Mounce, Tony's governor and bear-leader, was just putting a hand to the third clause of the fourth part of a sermon on Free-Will and Predestination as the Hepzibah B.'s anchor rattled overboard. Tony, in his haste to be ashore, would have made one plunge with the anchor; but the Reverend Ozias, on being roused from his lucubrations, earnestly protested against leaving his argument in suspense. What was the trifle of an arrival at some Papistical foreign city, where the very churches wore turbans like so many Moslem idolators, to the important fact of Mr. Mounce's summing up his conclusions before the Muse of Theology took flight? He should be happy, he said, if the tide served, to visit Venice with Mr. Bracknell the next morning.

The next morning, ha!—Tony murmured a submissive "Yes, sir," winked at the subjugated captain, buckled on his sword, pressed his hat down with a flourish, and before the Reverend Ozias had arrived at his next

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deduction, was skimming merrily shoreward in the Hepzibah's gig.

A moment more and he was in the thick of it! Here was the very world of the old print, only suffused with sunlight and colour, and bubbling with merry noises. What a scene it was! A square enclosed in fantastic painted buildings, and peopled with a throng as fantastic: a bawling, laughing, jostling, sweating mob, parti-coloured, parti-speeched, crackling and sputtering under the hot sun like a dish of fritters over a kitchen fire. Tony, agape, shouldered his way through the press, aware at once that, spite of the tumult, the shrillness, the gesticulation, there was no undercurrent of clownishness, no tendency to horse-play, as in such crowds on market-day at home, but a kind of facetious suavity which seemed to include everybody in the circumference of one huge joke. In such an air the sense of strangeness soon wore off, and Tony was beginning to feel himself vastly at home, when a lift of the tide bore him against a droll-looking bell-ringing fellow who carried above his head a tall metal tree hung with sherbet-glasses.

The encounter set the glasses spinning and three or four spun off and clattered to the stones. The sherbet-seller called on all the saints, and Tony, clapping a lordly hand to his pocket, tossed him a ducat by mistake for a sequin. The fellow's eyes shot out of their orbits, and just then a personable-looking young man who had observed the transaction stepped up to Tony and said pleasantly, in English:

"I perceive, sir, that you are not familiar with our currency."

"Does he want more?" says Tony, very lordly; whereat the other laughed and replied: "You have given him enough to retire from his business and open a gaming-house over the arcade."

Tony joined in the laugh, and this incident bridging the preliminaries, the two young men were presently hobnobbing over a glass of Canary in front of one of the coffee-houses about the square. Tony counted himself lucky to have run across an English-speaking companion who was good-natured enough to give him a clue to the labyrinth; and when he had paid for the Canary (in the coin his friend selected) they set out again to view the town. The Italian gentleman, who called himself Count Rialto, appeared to have a very numerous acquaintance, and was able to point out to Tony all the chief dignitaries of the state, the men of ton and ladies of fashion, as well as a number of other characters of a kind not openly mentioned in taking a census of Salem.

Tony, who was not averse from reading when nothing better offered, had perused the "Merchant of Venice" and Mr. Otway's fine tragedy; but though these pieces had given him a notion that the social usages of Venice differed from those at home, he was unprepared for the surprising appearance and manners of the great people his friend named to him. The gravest Senators of the Republic went in prodigious striped trousers, short cloaks and feathered hats. One nobleman wore a ruff and doctor's gown, another a black velvet tunic slashed with rose-colour; while the President of the dreaded Council of Ten was a terrible strutting fellow with a rapier-like nose, a buff leather jerkin and a trailing scarlet cloak that the crowd was careful not to step on.

It was all vastly diverting, and Tony would gladly have gone on forever; but he had given his word to the captain to be at the landing-place at sunset, and here was dusk already creeping over the skies! Tony was a man of honour; and having pressed on the Count a handsome damascened dagger selected from one of the goldsmiths' shops in a narrow street lined with such wares, he insisted on turning his face toward the Hepzibah's gig. The Count yielded reluctantly; but as they came out again on the square they were caught in a great throng pouring toward the doors of the cathedral.

"They go to Benediction," said the Count. "A beautiful sight, with many lights and flowers. It is a pity you cannot take a peep at it."

Tony thought so too, and in another minute a legless beggar had pulled back the leathern flap of the cathedral door, and they stood in a haze of gold and perfume that seemed to rise and fall on the mighty undulations of the organ. Here the press was as thick as without; and as Tony flattened himself against a pillar, he heard a pretty voice at his elbow:—"Oh, sir, oh, sir, your sword!"

He turned at sound of the broken English, and saw a girl who matched the voice trying to disengage her dress from the tip of his scabbard. She wore one of the voluminous black hoods which the Venetian ladies affected, and under its projecting eaves her face spied out at him as sweet as a nesting bird.

In the dusk their hands met over the scabbard, and as she freed herself a shred of her lace flounce clung to Tony's enchanted fingers. Looking after her, he saw she was on the arm of a pompous-looking graybeard in a long black gown and scarlet stockings, who, on perceiving the exchange of glances between the young people, drew the lady away with a threatening look.

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The Count met Tony's eye with a smile. "One of our Venetian beauties," said he; "the lovely Polixena Cador. She is thought to have the finest eyes in Venice."

"She spoke English," stammered Tony.

"Oh—ah—precisely: she learned the language at the Court of Saint James's, where her father, the Senator, was formerly accredited as Ambassador. She played as an infant with the royal princes of England."

"And that was her father?"

"Assuredly: young ladies of Donna Polixena's rank do not go abroad save with their parents or a duenna."

Just then a soft hand slid into Tony's. His heart gave a foolish bound, and he turned about half—expecting to meet again the merry eyes under the hood; but saw instead a slender brown boy, in some kind of fanciful page's dress, who thrust a folded paper between his fingers and vanished in the throng. Tony, in a tingle, glanced surreptitiously at the Count, who appeared absorbed in his prayers. The crowd, at the ringing of a bell, had in fact been overswept by a sudden wave of devotion; and Tony seized the moment to step beneath a lighted shrine with his letter.

"I am in dreadful trouble and implore your help. Polixena"—he read; but hardly had he seized the sense of the words when a hand fell on his shoulder, and a stern-looking man in a cocked hat, and bearing a kind of rod or mace, pronounced a few words in Venetian.

Tony, with a start, thrust the letter in his breast, and tried to jerk himself free; but the harder he jerked the tighter grew the other's grip, and the Count, presently perceiving what had happened, pushed his way through the crowd, and whispered hastily to his companion: "For God's sake, make no struggle. This is serious. Keep quiet and do as I tell you."

Tony was no chicken-heart. He had something of a name for pugnacity among the lads of his own age at home, and was not the man to stand in Venice what he would have resented in Salem; but the devil of it was that this black fellow seemed to be pointing to the letter in his breast; and this suspicion was confirmed by the Count's agitated whisper.

"This is one of the agents of the Ten.—For God's sake, no outcry." He exchanged a word or two with the mace-bearer and again turned to Tony. "You have been seen concealing a letter about your person—"

"And what of that?" says Tony furiously.

"Gently, gently, my master. A letter handed to you by the page of Donna Polixena Cador.—A black business! Oh, a very black business! This Cador is one of the most powerful nobles in Venice—I beseech you, not a word, sir! Let me think— deliberate—"

His hand on Tony's shoulder, he carried on a rapid dialogue with the potentate in the cocked hat.

"I am sorry, sir—but our young ladies of rank are as jealously guarded as the Grand Turk's wives, and you must be answerable for this scandal. The best I can do is to have you taken privately to the Palazzo Cador, instead of being brought before the Council. I have pleaded your youth and inexperience"—Tony winced at this—"and I think the business may still be arranged."

Meanwhile the agent of the Ten had yielded his place to a sharp-featured shabby-looking fellow in black, dressed somewhat like a lawyer's clerk, who laid a grimy hand on Tony's arm, and with many apologetic gestures steered him through the crowd to the doors of the church. The Count held him by the other arm, and in this fashion they emerged on the square, which now lay in darkness save for the many lights twinkling under the arcade and in the windows of the gaming-rooms above it.

Tony by this time had regained voice enough to declare that he would go where they pleased, but that he must first say a word to the mate of the Hepzibah, who had now been awaiting him some two hours or more at the landing-place.

The Count repeated this to Tony's custodian, but the latter shook his head and rattled off a sharp denial.

"Impossible, sir," said the Count. "I entreat you not to insist. Any resistance will tell against you in the end."

Tony fell silent. With a rapid eye he was measuring his chances of escape. In wind and limb he was more than a mate for his captors, and boyhood's ruses were not so far behind him but he felt himself equal to outwitting a dozen grown men; but he had the sense to see that at a cry the crowd would close in on him. Space was what he wanted: a clear ten yards, and he would have laughed at Doge and Council. But the throng was thick as glue, and he walked on submissively, keeping his eye alert for an opening. Suddenly the mob swerved aside after some new show. Tony's fist shot out at the black fellow's chest, and before the latter could right himself the young New

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Englander was showing a clean pair of heels to his escort. On he sped, cleaving the crowd like a flood-tide in Gloucester bay, diving under the first arch that caught his eye, dashing down a lane to an unlit water-way, and plunging across a narrow hump-back bridge which landed him in a black pocket between walls. But now his pursuers were at his back, reinforced by the yelping mob. The walls were too high to scale, and for all his courage Tony's breath came short as he paced the masonry cage in which ill-luck had landed him. Suddenly a gate opened in one of the walls, and a slip of a servant wench looked out and beckoned him. There was no time to weigh chances. Tony dashed through the gate, his rescuer slammed and bolted it, and the two stood in a narrow paved well between high houses.

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II

The servant picked up a lantern and signed to Tony to follow her. They climbed a squalid stairway of stone, felt their way along a corridor, and entered a tall vaulted room feebly lit by an oil-lamp hung from the painted ceiling. Tony discerned traces of former splendour in his surroundings, but he had no time to examine them, for a figure started up at his approach and in the dim light he recognized the girl who was the cause of all his troubles.

She sprang toward him with outstretched hands, but as he advanced her face changed and she shrank back abashed.

"This is a misunderstanding—a dreadful misunderstanding," she cried out in her pretty broken English. "Oh, how does it happen that you are here?"

"Through no choice of my own, madam, I assure you!" retorted Tony, not over-pleased by his reception.

"But why—how—how did you make this unfortunate mistake?"

"Why, madam, if you'll excuse my candour, I think the mistake was yours—"

"Mine?"

—"in sending me a letter—"

"YOU—a letter?"

—"by a simpleton of a lad, who must needs hand it to me under your father's very nose—"

The girl broke in on him with a cry. "What! It was YOU who received my letter?" She swept round on the little maid-servant and submerged her under a flood of Venetian. The latter volleyed back in the same jargon, and as she did so, Tony's astonished eye detected in her the doubled page who had handed him the letter in Saint Mark's.

"What!" he cried, "the lad was this girl in disguise?"

Polixena broke off with an irrepressible smile; but her face clouded instantly and she returned to the charge.

"This wicked, careless girl—she has ruined me, she will be my undoing! Oh, sir, how can I make you understand? The letter was not intended for you—it was meant for the English Ambassador, an old friend of my mother's, from whom I hoped to obtain assistance—oh, how can I ever excuse myself to you?"

"No excuses are needed, madam," said Tony, bowing; "though I am surprised, I own, that any one should mistake me for an ambassador."

Here a wave of mirth again overran Polixena's face. "Oh, sir, you must pardon my poor girl's mistake. She heard you speaking English, and—and—I had told her to hand the letter to the handsomest foreigner in the church." Tony bowed again, more profoundly. "The English Ambassador," Polixena added simply, "is a very handsome man."

"I wish, madam, I were a better proxy!"

She echoed his laugh, and then clapped her hands together with a look of anguish. "Fool that I am! How can I jest at such a moment? I am in dreadful trouble, and now perhaps I have brought trouble on you also— Oh, my father! I hear my father coming!" She turned pale and leaned tremblingly upon the little servant.

Footsteps and loud voices were in fact heard outside, and a moment later the red-stockinged Senator stalked into the room attended by half-a-dozen of the magnificoes whom Tony had seen abroad in the square. At sight of him, all clapped hands to their swords and burst into furious outcries; and though their jargon was unintelligible to the young man, their tones and gestures made their meaning unpleasantly plain. The Senator, with a start of anger, first flung himself on the intruder; then, snatched back by his companions, turned wrathfully on his daughter, who, at his feet, with outstretched arms and streaming face, pleaded her cause with all the eloquence of young distress. Meanwhile the other nobles gesticulated vehemently among themselves, and one, a truculent-looking personage in ruff and Spanish cape, stalked apart, keeping a jealous eye on Tony. The latter was at his wit's end how to comport himself, for the lovely Polixena's tears had quite drowned her few words of English, and beyond guessing that the magnificoes meant him a mischief he had no notion what they would be at.

At this point, luckily, his friend Count Rialto suddenly broke in on the scene, and was at once assailed by all the tongues in the room. He pulled a long face at sight of Tony, but signed to the young man to be silent, and addressed himself earnestly to the Senator. The latter, at first, would not draw breath to hear him; but presently,

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sobering, he walked apart with the Count, and the two conversed together out of earshot.

"My dear sir," said the Count, at length turning to Tony with a perturbed countenance, "it is as I feared, and you are fallen into a great misfortune."

"A great misfortune! A great trap, I call it!" shouted Tony, whose blood, by this time, was boiling; but as he uttered the word the beautiful Polixena cast such a stricken look on him that he blushed up to the forehead.

"Be careful," said the Count, in a low tone. "Though his Illustriousness does not speak your language, he understands a few words of it, and—"

"So much the better!" broke in Tony; "I hope he will understand me if I ask him in plain English what is his grievance against me."

The Senator, at this, would have burst forth again; but the Count, stepping between, answered quickly: "His grievance against you is that you have been detected in secret correspondence with his daughter, the most noble Polixena Cador, the betrothed bride of this gentleman, the most illustrious Marquess Zanipolo—" and he waved a deferential hand at the frowning hidalgo of the cape and ruff.

"Sir," said Tony, "if that is the extent of my offence, it lies with the young lady to set me free, since by her own avowal—" but here he stopped short, for, to his surprise, Polixena shot a terrified glance at him.

"Sir," interposed the Count, "we are not accustomed in Venice to take shelter behind a lady's reputation."

"No more are we in Salem," retorted Tony in a white heat. "I was merely about to remark that, by the young lady's avowal, she has never seen me before."

Polixena's eyes signalled her gratitude, and he felt he would have died to defend her.

The Count translated his statement, and presently pursued: "His Illustriousness observes that, in that case, his daughter's misconduct has been all the more reprehensible."

"Her misconduct? Of what does he accuse her?"

"Of sending you, just now, in the church of Saint Mark's, a letter which you were seen to read openly and thrust in your bosom. The incident was witnessed by his Illustriousness the Marquess Zanipolo, who, in consequence, has already repudiated his unhappy bride."

Tony stared contemptuously at the black Marquess. "If his Illustriousness is so lacking in gallantry as to repudiate a lady on so trivial a pretext, it is he and not I who should be the object of her father's resentment."

"That, my dear young gentleman, is hardly for you to decide. Your only excuse being your ignorance of our customs, it is scarcely for you to advise us how to behave in matters of punctilio."

It seemed to Tony as though the Count were going over to his enemies, and the thought sharpened his retort.

"I had supposed," said he, "that men of sense had much the same behaviour in all countries, and that, here as elsewhere, a gentleman would be taken at his word. I solemnly affirm that the letter I was seen to read reflects in no way on the honour of this young lady, and has in fact nothing to do with what you suppose."

As he had himself no notion what the letter was about, this was as far as he dared commit himself.

There was another brief consultation in the opposing camp, and the Count then said:—"We all know, sir, that a gentleman is obliged to meet certain enquiries by a denial; but you have at your command the means of immediately clearing the lady. Will you show the letter to her father?"

There was a perceptible pause, during which Tony, while appearing to look straight before him, managed to deflect an interrogatory glance toward Polixena. Her reply was a faint negative motion, accompanied by unmistakable signs of apprehension.

"Poor girl!" he thought, "she is in a worse case than I imagined, and whatever happens I must keep her secret."

He turned to the Senator with a deep bow. "I am not," said he, "in the habit of showing my private correspondence to strangers."

The Count interpreted these words, and Donna Polixena's father, dashing his hand on his hilt, broke into furious invective, while the Marquess continued to nurse his outraged feelings aloof.

The Count shook his head funereally. "Alas, sir, it is as I feared. This is not the first time that youth and propinquity have led to fatal imprudence. But I need hardly, I suppose, point out the obligation incumbent upon you as a man of honour."

Tony stared at him haughtily, with a look which was meant for the Marquess. "And what obligation is that?"

"To repair the wrong you have done—in other words, to marry the lady."

Polixena at this burst into tears, and Tony said to himself: "Why in heaven does she not bid me show the

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letter?" Then he remembered that it had no superscription, and that the words it contained, supposing them to have been addressed to himself, were hardly of a nature to disarm suspicion. The sense of the girl's grave plight effaced all thought of his own risk, but the Count's last words struck him as so preposterous that he could not repress a smile.

"I cannot flatter myself," said he, "that the lady would welcome this solution."

The Count's manner became increasingly ceremonious. "Such modesty," he said, "becomes your youth and inexperience; but even if it were justified it would scarcely alter the case, as it is always assumed in this country that a young lady wishes to marry the man whom her father has selected."

"But I understood just now," Tony interposed, "that the gentleman yonder was in that enviable position."

"So he was, till circumstances obliged him to waive the privilege in your favour."

"He does me too much honour; but if a deep sense of my unworthiness obliges me to decline—"

"You are still," interrupted the Count, "labouring under a misapprehension. Your choice in the matter is no more to be consulted than the lady's. Not to put too fine a point on it, it is necessary that you should marry her within the hour."

Tony, at this, for all his spirit, felt the blood run thin in his veins. He looked in silence at the threatening visages between himself and the door, stole a side-glance at the high barred windows of the apartment, and then turned to Polixena, who had fallen sobbing at her father's feet.

"And if I refuse?" said he.

The Count made a significant gesture. "I am not so foolish as to threaten a man of your mettle. But perhaps you are unaware what the consequences would be to the lady."

Polixena, at this, struggling to her feet, addressed a few impassioned words to the Count and her father; but the latter put her aside with an obdurate gesture.

The Count turned to Tony. "The lady herself pleads for you—at what cost you do not guess—but as you see it is vain. In an hour his Illustriousness's chaplain will be here. Meanwhile his Illustriousness consents to leave you in the custody of your betrothed."

He stepped back, and the other gentlemen, bowing with deep ceremony to Tony, stalked out one by one from the room. Tony heard the key turn in the lock, and found himself alone with Polixena.

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The girl had sunk into a chair, her face hidden, a picture of shame and agony. So moving was the sight that Tony once again forgot his own extremity in the view of her distress. He went and kneeled beside her, drawing her hands from her face.

"Oh, don't make me look at you!" she sobbed; but it was on his bosom that she hid from his gaze. He held her there a breathing—space, as he might have clasped a weeping child; then she drew back and put him gently from her.

"What humiliation!" she lamented.

"Do you think I blame you for what has happened?"

"Alas, was it not my foolish letter that brought you to this plight? And how nobly you defended me! How generous it was of you not to show the letter! If my father knew I had written to the Ambassador to save me from this dreadful marriage his anger against me would be even greater."

"Ah—it was that you wrote for?" cried Tony with unaccountable relief.

"Of course—what else did you think?"

"But is it too late for the Ambassador to save you?"

"From YOU?" A smile flashed through her tears. "Alas, yes." She drew back and hid her face again, as though overcome by a fresh wave of shame.

Tony glanced about him. "If I could wrench a bar out of that window—" he muttered.

"Impossible! The court is guarded. You are a prisoner, alas.— Oh, I must speak!" She sprang up and paced the room. "But indeed you can scarce think worse of me than you do already—"

"I think ill of you?"

"Alas, you must! To be unwilling to marry the man my father has chosen for me—"

"Such a beetle—browed lout! It would be a burning shame if you married him."

"Ah, you come from a free country. Here a girl is allowed no choice."

"It is infamous, I say—infamous!"

"No, no—I ought to have resigned myself, like so many others."

"Resigned yourself to that brute! Impossible!"

"He has a dreadful name for violence—his gondolier has told my little maid such tales of him! But why do I talk of myself, when it is of you I should be thinking?"

"Of me, poor child?" cried Tony, losing his head.

"Yes, and how to save you—for I CAN save you! But every moment counts—and yet what I have to say is so dreadful."

"Nothing from your lips could seem dreadful."

"Ah, if he had had your way of speaking!"

"Well, now at least you are free of him," said Tony, a little wildly; but at this she stood up and bent a grave look on him.

"No, I am not free," she said; "but you are, if you will do as I tell you."

Tony, at this, felt a sudden dizziness; as though, from a mad flight through clouds and darkness, he had dropped to safety again, and the fall had stunned him.

"What am I to do?" he said.

"Look away from me, or I can never tell you."

He thought at first that this was a jest, but her eyes commanded him, and reluctantly he walked away and leaned in the embrasure of the window. She stood in the middle of the room, and as soon as his back was turned she began to speak in a quick monotonous voice, as though she were reciting a lesson.

"You must know that the Marquess Zanipolo, though a great noble, is not a rich man. True, he has large estates, but he is a desperate spendthrift and gambler, and would sell his soul for a round sum of ready money.—If you turn round I shall not go on!— He wrangled horribly with my father over my dowry—he wanted me to have more than either of my sisters, though one married a Procurator and the other a grandee of Spain. But my father is

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a gambler too—oh, such fortunes as are squandered over the arcade yonder! And so—and so—don't turn, I implore you—oh, do you begin to see my meaning?"

She broke off sobbing, and it took all his strength to keep his eyes from her.

"Go on," he said.

"Will you not understand? Oh, I would say anything to save you! You don't know us Venetians—we're all to be bought for a price. It is not only the brides who are marketable—sometimes the husbands sell themselves too. And they think you rich—my father does, and the others—I don't know why, unless you have shown your money too freely—and the English are all rich, are they not? And—oh, oh—do you understand? Oh, I can't bear your eyes!"

She dropped into a chair, her head on her arms, and Tony in a flash was at her side.

"My poor child, my poor Polixena!" he cried, and wept and clasped her.

"You ARE rich, are you not? You would promise them a ransom?" she persisted.

"To enable you to marry the Marquess?"

"To enable you to escape from this place. Oh, I hope I may never see your face again." She fell to weeping once more, and he drew away and paced the floor in a fever.

Presently she sprang up with a fresh air of resolution, and pointed to a clock against the wall. "The hour is nearly over. It is quite true that my father is gone to fetch his chaplain. Oh, I implore you, be warned by me! There is no other way of escape."

"And if I do as you say—?"

"You are safe! You are free! I stake my life on it."

"And you—you are married to that villain?"

"But I shall have saved you. Tell me your name, that I may say it to myself when I am alone."

"My name is Anthony. But you must not marry that fellow."

"You forgive me, Anthony? You don't think too badly of me?"

"I say you must not marry that fellow."

She laid a trembling hand on his arm. "Time presses," she adjured him, "and I warn you there is no other way."

For a moment he had a vision of his mother, sitting very upright, on a Sunday evening, reading Dr. Tillotson's sermons in the best parlour at Salem; then he swung round on the girl and caught both her hands in his. "Yes, there is," he cried, "if you are willing. Polixena, let the priest come!"

She shrank back from him, white and radiant. "Oh, hush, be silent!" she said.

"I am no noble Marquess, and have no great estates," he cried. "My father is a plain India merchant in the colony of Massachusetts—but if you—"

"Oh, hush, I say! I don't know what your long words mean. But I bless you, bless you, bless you on my knees!" And she knelt before him, and fell to kissing his hands.

He drew her up to his breast and held her there.

"You are willing, Polixena?" he said.

"No, no!" She broke from him with outstretched hands. "I am not willing. You mistake me. I must marry the Marquess, I tell you!"

"On my money?" he taunted her; and her burning blush rebuked him.

"Yes, on your money," she said sadly.

"Why? Because, much as you hate him, you hate me still more?"

She was silent.

"If you hate me, why do you sacrifice yourself for me?" he persisted.

"You torture me! And I tell you the hour is past."

"Let it pass. I'll not accept your sacrifice. I will not lift a finger to help another man to marry you."

"Oh, madman, madman!" she murmured.

Tony, with crossed arms, faced her squarely, and she leaned against the wall a few feet off from him. Her breast throbbed under its lace and falbalas, and her eyes swam with terror and entreaty.

"Polixena, I love you!" he cried.

A blush swept over her throat and bosom, bathing her in light to the verge of her troubled brows.

A VENETIAN NIGHT'S ENTERTAINMENT

"I love you! I love you!" he repeated.

And now she was on his breast again, and all their youth was in their lips. But her embrace was as fleeting as a bird's poise and before he knew it he clasped empty air, and half the room was between them.

She was holding up a little coral charm and laughing. "I took it from your fob," she said. "It is of no value, is it? And I shall not get any of the money, you know."

She continued to laugh strangely, and the rouge burned like fire in her ashen face.

"What are you talking of?" he said.

"They never give me anything but the clothes I wear. And I shall never see you again, Anthony!" She gave him a dreadful look. "Oh, my poor boy, my poor love—I LOVE YOU, I LOVE YOU, POLIXENA!"

He thought she had turned light-headed, and advanced to her with soothing words; but she held him quietly at arm's length, and as he gazed he read the truth in her face.

He fell back from her, and a sob broke from him as he bowed his head on his hands.

"Only, for God's sake, have the money ready, or there may be foul play here," she said.

As she spoke there was a great tramping of steps outside and a burst of voices on the threshold.

"It is all a lie," she gasped out, "about my marriage, and the Marquess, and the Ambassador, and the Senator—but not, oh, not about your danger in this place—or about my love," she breathed to him. And as the key rattled in the door she laid her lips on his brow.

The key rattled, and the door swung open—but the black-cassocked gentleman who stepped in, though a priest indeed, was no votary of idolatrous rites, but that sound orthodox divine, the Reverend Ozias Mounce, looking very much perturbed at his surroundings, and very much on the alert for the Scarlet Woman. He was supported, to his evident relief, by the captain of the Hepzibah B., and the procession was closed by an escort of stern-looking fellows in cocked hats and small-swords, who led between them Tony's late friends the magnificoes, now as sorry a looking company as the law ever landed in her net.

The captain strode briskly into the room, uttering a grunt of satisfaction as he clapped eyes on Tony.

"So, Mr. Bracknell," said he, "you have been seeing the Carnival with this pack of mummers, have you? And this is where your pleasuring has landed you? H'm—a pretty establishment, and a pretty lady at the head of it." He glanced about the apartment and doffed his hat with mock ceremony to Polixena, who faced him like a princess.

"Why, my girl," said he, amicably, "I think I saw you this morning in the square, on the arm of the Pantaloon yonder; and as for that Captain Spavent—" and he pointed a derisive finger at the Marquess—"I've watched him drive his bully's trade under the arcade ever since I first dropped anchor in these waters. Well, well," he continued, his indignation subsiding, "all's fair in Carnival, I suppose, but this gentleman here is under sailing orders, and I fear we must break up your little party."

At this Tony saw Count Rialto step forward, looking very small and explanatory, and uncovering obsequiously to the captain.

"I can assure you, sir," said the Count in his best English, "that this incident is the result of an unfortunate misunderstanding, and if you will oblige us by dismissing these myrmidons, any of my friends here will be happy to offer satisfaction to Mr. Bracknell and his companions."

Mr. Mounce shrank visibly at this, and the captain burst into a loud guffaw.

"Satisfaction?" says he. "Why, my cock, that's very handsome of you, considering the rope's at your throats. But we'll not take advantage of your generosity, for I fear Mr. Bracknell has already trespassed on it too long. You pack of galley-slaves, you!" he spluttered suddenly, "decoying young innocents with that devil's bait of yours—" His eye fell on Polixena, and his voice softened unaccountably. "Ah, well, we must all see the Carnival once, I suppose," he said. "All's well that ends well, as the fellow says in the play; and now, if you please, Mr. Bracknell, if you'll take the reverend gentleman's arm there, we'll bid adieu to our hospitable entertainers, and right about face for the Hepzibah."