The Lion of St. Mark.

G. A. Henty.

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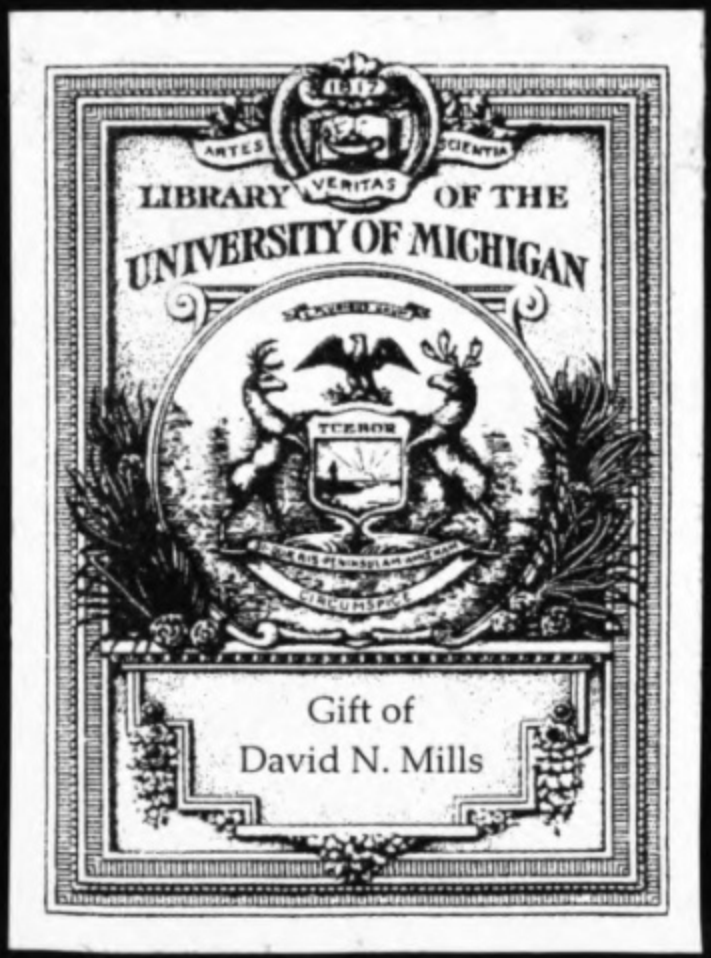

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SIGNOR POLANI ACCOMPANIES FRANCIS TO THE STEPS.

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THE LION OF ST. MARK:

A TALE OF VENICE.

BY

G. A. HENTY,

Author of "Bonnie Prince Charlie;" "For the Temple;" "By Sheer Pluck;" "With Clive in India;" &c.

WITH TEN FULL-PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS BY GORDON BROWNE.

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PREFACE.

MY DEAR LADS,

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 ever saw.

Yours sincerely,

G. A. HENTY.

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THE LION OF ST. MARK.

CHAPTER I.

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?"

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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 to-morrow morning be lying in the dungeons of St.

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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 half-way 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

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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 head-quarters 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

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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 ascendency 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

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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

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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 St. 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 Ægean, 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

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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 St. 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

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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 good-night 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

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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

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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 quarter-staffs; 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 battle-axe; 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,

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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 egg-shell, 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

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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."

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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

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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 Piazetta 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 cut-throats 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."

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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.

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CHAPTER II.

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 head-quarters 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

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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."

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"At anyrate 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 look-out 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

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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:

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"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

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I saw one or two boats 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 St. 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 scat-

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tered 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

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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

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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 to-morrow; 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."

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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

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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

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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

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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?"

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"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 sun-dials, as everyone else can; but as to reading and writing, that is not for poor lads like us."

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FRANCIS WATCHES THE CONSPIRATORS ON SAN NICOLO.

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The stranger was satisfied. Certainly every one could read the sun-dials; 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 half-way 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,

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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 half-way up the walls. There was no garden or inclosure round it, and any passer-by 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,

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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

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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

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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.

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CHAPTER III.

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 St. 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,

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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,

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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

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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

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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

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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 to-morrow 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?"

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"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."

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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 to-morrow

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I will lay the matter before the council and demand repara tion."

"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 to-morrow, 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 some one 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."

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"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

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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

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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

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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."

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"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 battle-axe."

"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

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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 a 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,

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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 extravagancies 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."

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"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,

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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.

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CHAPTER IV.

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 horse-shoe 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.

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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 conncil 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.

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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 anyrate, 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

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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 anyrate," 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

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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 to-day."

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

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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

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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

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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.

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"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 anyrate 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 daugh-

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ter 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

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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.

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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

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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

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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 to-morrow."

"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

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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"

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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,

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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'

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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'"

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"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."

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CHAPTER V.

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

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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

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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 despatched 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 despatched 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, Giu-

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seppi; 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

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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 look-out. 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

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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

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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."

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"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 every one 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

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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

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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

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canal, and then straight on until, nearly opposite St. 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

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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 St. 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

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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.

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"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 St. 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.

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"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

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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."

The story had been frequently interrupted by exclamations of surprise by Polani. At its conclusion he laid his hand on Francis' shoulder.

"My dear boy," he said, "how can I thank you! You seem to me to be born to be the preserver of my daughters. I cannot doubt that your suspicion is correct, and that they are confined in this hut at San Nicolo. How fortunate that you did not denounce this conspiracy—for conspiracy no doubt it is—that you discovered, for, had you done so, some other place would have been selected for the girls' prison."

"I would not be too sanguine, sir. The girls may not be in this hut, still we may come on some clue there which may lead us to them; if not, we will search the islands on that side as closely as we have done those on the mainland."

"Now, shall I send for the gondoliers and set out at once? There are ten or twelve men in the house, and it is hardly

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likely that they will place a guard over them of anything like this strength, as of course they will be anxious to avoid observation by the islanders."

"I do not think I would do anything to-night, sir," Francis said; "the gondola that chased us will be on the alert. They cannot, of course, suspect in the slightest that we have any clue to the hiding-place of your daughters, still they might think that if we were really pursuing the other gondola and had recognized the woman Castaldi, we might bring the news to you, and that a stir might be made; they may therefore be watching to see if anything comes of it; and if they saw a bustle and gondolas setting out taking the direction of the island, they might set off and get there first, for it is a very fast craft, and remove your daughters before we reach the hut.

"I should say wait till morning. They may be watching your house now, and if in an hour or two they see all is quiet they will no doubt retire with the belief that all danger is at an end. Then, in the morning, I would embark the men in two or three gondolas, but I would not start from your own steps, for no doubt your house is watched. Let the men go out singly and embark at a distance from here, and not at the same place. Once out upon the lagoon, they should row quietly towards San Nicolo, keeping a considerable distance apart, the men lying down in the bottom as the boats approach the island, so that if anyone is on watch he will have no suspicion.

"As I am the only one that knows the position of the hut I will be with you in the first gondola. We will not land near the hut, but pass by and land at the other end of the island; the other gondolas will slowly follow us and land at the same spot; then three or four men can go along by the sea face, with orders to watch any boats hauled up upon the shore there and stop any party making down towards them. The rest of us will walk straight to the hut, and, as it lies among sand-hills,

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I hope we shall be able to get quite close to it before our approach is discovered."

"An excellent plan, Francisco, though I am so impatient that the night will seem endless to me; but certainly your plan is the best. Even if the house is watched and you were seen to enter, if all remains perfectly quiet they will naturally suppose that the news you brought was not considered of sufficient importance to lead to any action. You will, of course, remain here till morning?"

"I cannot do that, sir, though I will return the first thing. There is lying on my table a paper with the particulars and names of the persons I saw meet in this hut, and a request to my father that if I do not return in the morning he will at once lay this before the council. I place it there every day when I go out, in order that, if I should be seized and carried off by Mocenigo's people, I should have some means of forcing them to let me go. Although I know absolutely nothing of the nature of the conspiracy, they will not know how much I am aware of, or what particulars I may have given in the document; and as I could name to them those present, and among them is the envoy of the King of Hungary now in the city, they would hardly dare harm me, when they knew that if they did so this affair would be brought before the council."

"It was an excellent precaution, Francisco. Why, you are as prudent and thoughtful as you are courageous!"

"It was not likely to be of much use, sir," Francis said modestly. "I was very much more likely to get a stab in the back than to be carried off. Still, it was just possible that Mocenigo might himself like to see his vengeance carried out, and it was therefore worth my while guarding against it; but, as you see, it will be necessary for me to be back sometime before morning."

"At any rate, Francisco, you had better wait here until

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morning breaks. Your room is not likely to be entered for some hours after that; so while I am preparing for our expedition, you can go out and make your way to the Grand Canal, hail an early gondola, and be put down at your own steps, when, as you have told me, you can enter the house without disturbing anyone; then you can remove that paper and return here in the gondola. We will start at seven; there will be plenty of boats about by that time, and the lagoon will be dotted by the fishermen's craft, so that our gondolas will attract no attention."

"Perhaps that will be the best plan, signor; and, indeed, I should not be sorry for a few hours' sleep, for Giuseppi and I have been in our boat since a very early hour in the morning, and were pretty well tired out before this last adventure began."

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CHAPTER VI.

THE HUT ON SAN NICOLO.

AT seven o'clock all was in readiness for a start. Signor Polani set out alone in his gondola, and picked up Francis and four men at a secluded spot some distance from the house. A messenger had been sent two hours before to the captain of one of the merchant ships lying in the port. He at once put ten men into a large boat and rowed down to within half a mile of the island. Here a grapnel was thrown overboard, most of the men lay down in the bottom, and the captain, according to his instructions, kept a sharp look-out to see that no boat left San Nicolo—his instructions being to overhaul any boat coming out, and to see that no one was concealed on board it. There he remained until Polani's gondola rowed past him. After it had gone a few hundred yards the grapnel was got up, the men took to their oars and followed the gondola, keeping so far behind that it would not seem there was any connection between them.

Francis made for the narrow channel which separated San Nicolo from the next island, and then directed the gondola to be run ashore, where a low sand-hill close by hid them from the sight of any one on the look-out. A few minutes later the ship's boat arrived. Francis now led the way direct for the hut, accompanied by Polani and six men, while four sailors

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advanced at a distance of a hundred yards on either flank to cut off any one making for the water.

"We may as well go fast," he said, "for we can scarcely get there without being seen by a look-out should there be one on the sand-hills, and the distance is so short that there will be no possibility of their carrying your daughters off before we get there."

"The faster the better," the merchant said. "This suspense is terrible."

Accordingly, the party started at a brisk run. Francis kept his eyes on the spot where he believed the hut lay.

"I see no one anywhere near there," he said, as they came over one of the sand ridges. "Had there been any one on the watch I think we should see him now."

On they ran, until, passing over one of the sand-hills, Francis came to a stand-still. The hut lay in the hollow below them.

"There is the house, signor; now we shall soon know."

They dashed down the short slope and gathered round the door.

"Within there, open!" the merchant shouted, hammering with the hilt of his sword on the door.

All was silent within.

"Break it down!" he said; and two of the sailors, who had brought axes with them, began to hew away at the door. A few blows and it suddenly opened, and two men dressed as fishermen appeared in the doorway.

"What means this attack upon the house of quiet people?" they demanded.

"Bind them securely," Polani said, as he rushed in, followed closely by Francis, while those who followed seized the men. Polani paused as he crossed the threshold, with a cry of disappointment—the hut was empty. Francis was almost equally disappointed.

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"If they are not here, they are near by," Francis said to Polani. "Do not give up hope. I am convinced they are not far off; and if we search we may find a clue. Better keep your men outside; we can search more thoroughly by ourselves."

The merchant told his men, who had seized and were binding the two occupants of the hut, to remain outside. The inside of the hut differed in no way from the ordinary dwelling of fishermen, except that a large table stood in the middle of it, and there were some benches against the walls. Some oars stood in one corner, and some nets were piled close to them. A fire burned in the open hearth, and a pot hung over it and two others stood on the hearth.

"Let us see what they have got here," Francis said, while the merchant leaned against the table with an air of profound depression, paying no attention to what he was doing.

"A soup," Francis said, lifting the lid from the pot over the fire, "and, by the smell, a good one." Then he lifted the other pots simmering among the burning brands. "A ragout of kid and a boiled fish. Signor Polani, this is no fisherman's meal; either these men expect visitors of a much higher degree than themselves, or your daughters are somewhere close. Oh! there is a door."

"It can lead nowhere," Polani said. "The sand is piled up to the roof on that side of the house."

"It is," Francis agreed; "but there may be a lower room there completely covered with the sand; at any rate we will see."

He pushed against the door, but it did not give in the slightest.

"It may be the sand," he said, "it may be bolts."

He went to the outside door and called in the sailors with the hatchets.

"Break open that door," he said. "There is a space behind," he exclaimed, as the first blow was given. "It is hollow, I swear; it would be a different sound altogether if sand was

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piled up against it." A dozen blows and the fastenings gave, and, sword in hand, the merchant and Francis rushed through it.

Both gave a shout of delight. They were in a room built out at the back of the hut. It was richly furnished, and hangings of Eastern stuffs covered the walls. A burning lamp hung from the ceiling. Two men stood irresolute with drawn swords, having apparently turned round just as the door gave way, for as it did so two figures struggled to their feet from a couch behind them, for some shawls had been wrapped round their heads, and with a cry of delight rushed forward to meet their rescuers. Seated at the end of the couch, with bowed-down head, was another female figure.

"Maria—Giulia!" the merchant exclaimed, as, dropping his sword, he clasped his daughters in his arms.

Francis, followed by the two sailors with hatchets, advanced towards the men.

"Drop your swords and surrender," he said. "Resistance is useless; there are a dozen men outside."

The men threw their swords down on the ground.

"Lead them outside and bind them securely," Francis said.

For the next minute or two few words were spoken. The girls sobbed with delight on their father's breast, while he himself was too moved to do more than murmur words of love and thankfulness. Francis went quietly out and spoke to the captain, who went in to the inner room, touched the sitting figure on the shoulder, and, taking her by the arm, led her outside.

"Come in, Francis," Polani called a minute later. "My dears, it is not me you must thank for your rescue, it is your English friend here who has again restored you to me. It is to him we owe our happiness, and that you, my child, are saved from the dreadful fate of being forced to be the wife of that villain Mocenigo. Embrace him, my dears, as a brother, for

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he has done more than a brother for you. And now tell me all that has happened since I last saw you."

"You know, father, the message that was brought us, that you had been hurt and wanted us home?"

"Yes, my dears, that I learned soon afterwards. I went at five o'clock to fetch you home, and found that you had gone, and why."

"Well, father, directly we had taken our seats in the cabin of the gondola our gouvernante closed the doors, and soon afterwards she slid to the two shutters before the windows. We cried out in surprise at finding ourselves in the dark, but she bade us be quiet in a tone quite different to any in which she had ever spoken to us before. We were both frightened, and tried to push back the shutters and open the door, but they were fastened firmly. I suppose there was some spring which held them. Then we screamed; but I could feel that the inside was all thickly padded. I suppose our voices could not be heard outside. I thought so, because once I thought I heard the gondoliers singing, but it was so faint that I could not be sure. Then the air seemed stiflingly close, and I fainted; and when I came to myself one of the windows was open, and Giulia said she had promised we would not scream, but I think we were beyond the canals then, for I could see nothing but the sky as we passed along. When I was better the windows were almost shut again, so that we could not see out, though a little air could get in; then the gondola went on for a long time. At last it stopped, and she said we must be blindfolded. We said we would not submit to it, and she told us unless we let her do it the men would do it. So we submitted, and she wrapped shawls closely over our heads. Then we were helped ashore, and walked some distance. At last the shawls were taken off our heads and we found ourselves here, and here we have been ever since."

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"You have not been ill-treated in any way, my children?" the merchant asked anxiously.

"Not at all, father; until to-day, nobody has been into this room besides ourselves and that woman. The door was generally left a little open for air, for you see there are no windows here. She used to go into the next room and come back with our food. We could see men moving about in there, but they were very quiet, and all spoke in low tones. You may think how we upbraided our gouvernante for her treachery, and threatened her with your anger. She told us we should never be found, and that I might as well make up my mind to marry Ruggiero Mocenigo, for if I did not consent quietly means would be found to compel me to do so. I said I would die first, but she used to laugh a cruel laugh and say he would soon be here with the priest, and that it mattered not whether I said yes or no, the ceremony would be performed, and then Ruggiero would sail away with me to the East, and I should be glad enough then to make peace between him and you; but he never came. I think she became anxious, for she went away twice for three or four hours, and locked us in here when she went. That, father, is all we know about it. Where are we?"

"You are at San Nicolo."

"On the island!" Maria exclaimed in surprise. "She told us we were on the mainland. And now, how did you find us?"

"I will tell you as we go home, Maria."

"Yes, that will be better, father. Giulia and I long for a breath of fresh air and the sight of the blue sky."

"Giulia has not had so much to frighten her as you have," her father said.

"Yes, I have, father; for she said I was to go across the seas with Maria, and that Ruggiero would soon find a husband for me among his friends. I told her she was a wicked woman over and over again, and we told her that we were sure you

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would forgive and even reward her if she would take us back again to you. When she was away we thought we would try to make our escape behind, and we made a little hole in the boards; but the sand came pouring in, and we found we were underground, though how we got there we didn't know, for we had not come down any steps. So we had to give up the idea of escape."

"You are partly underground," her father said, "for, as you will see when you get out, the sand has drifted up at the back of the hut to the roof, and has altogether hidden this part of the hut; so that we did not know that there was more than one room, and I should never have thought of breaking into that door had it not been for Francisco. And now come along, my dears; let us wait here no longer."

The sailors and servitors broke into a cheer as the girls came out of the hut.

"Shall we put a torch to this place?" Francis asked Polani.

"No, Francisco; it must be searched thoroughly first. Captain Lontano, do you order four of your men to remain here until some of the officials of the state arrive. If anyone comes before that, they must seize them and detain them as prisoners. The state will investigate the matter to the bottom."

Now that they were in the open air the merchant could see that the close confinement and anxiety had told greatly upon his daughters; both were pale and hollow-eyed, and looked as if they had suffered a long illness. Seeing how shaken they were he ordered one of the retainers to go to the gondola, and tell the men to row it round to the nearest point to the hut; the party then walked along down to the shore.

In a few minutes the gondola arrived; Polani, his two daughters, and Francis took their places in it; the four men, bound hand and foot, were laid in the bottom of the ship's boat; the gouvernante was made to take her place there also; and the

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sailors were told to follow closely behind the gondola, which was rowed at a very slow pace. On the way Polani told his daughters of the manner in which Francis had discovered the place of concealment.

"Had it not been for him, my dears, we should certainly not have found you, and that villain would have carried out his plans sooner or later. He would either have given his guards the slip, or, when no evidence was forthcoming against him, they would have been removed. He would then have gone outside the jurisdiction of the republic, obtained a ship with a crew of desperadoes, sailed round to the seaward side of San Nicolo, and carried you off. Nothing could have saved you, and your resistance would, as that woman told you, have been futile."

"We shall be grateful to you all our lives, Francisco," Maria said. "We shall pray for you always, night and morning, shall we not, Giulia?"

"Yes, indeed," the young girl said simply; "we shall love him all our lives."

"Answer for yourself, Giulia," Maria said with a laugh, her spirits returning in the bright sunshine and fresh air. "When Francisco asks for my love, it will be quite soon enough to say what I think about it."

"I should never have courage enough to do that, signora. I know what you would say too well."

"What should I say?" Maria asked.

"You would say I was an impudent boy."

Maria laughed.

"I cannot think of you as a boy any longer, Francisco," she said more gravely. "I have, perhaps, regarded you as a boy till now, though you did save us so bravely before; but you see you are only my own age, and a girl always looks upon a boy of her own age as ever so much younger than she is herself.

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Besides, too, you have none of the airs of being a man, which some of my cousins have; and never pay compliments or say pretty things, but seem altogether like a younger brother. But I shall think you a boy no more. I know you better now."

"But I am a boy," Francis said, "and I don't want to be thought anything else. In England we keep young longer than they do here, and a boy of my age would not think of speaking to his elders unless he was first addressed. What are you going to do with your prisoners, signor?"

"I shall take them direct to my house, and then go and report the recovery of my daughters and their capture. Officials will at once be sent with a gondola to take them off to the prison. There can be no question now as to the part Mocenigo has played in this business, and no doubt he will be brought here a prisoner at once. Even his nearest connections will not dare to defend conduct so outrageous, especially when public indignation has been so excited. You do not know, girls, what a stir has been caused in the city on your account. If it had not been for the citizen guard I believe the Mocenigo Palace would have been burned down, and Ruggiero's connections have scarcely dared to show their faces in the streets since you have been missing. You see every father of a family felt personally grieved, for if the nobles were permitted with impunity to carry off the daughters of citizens, who could feel safe? When this is all over I shall take you for a time back to our home in Corfu. It is not good for girls to be the subject of public talk and attention."

"I shall be very glad, father," Giulia said. "I love our home at Corfu, with its gardens and flowers, far better than the palazzo here. The air is always soft and balmy, while here it is so hot sometimes by day and so damp and foggy in the evening. I shall be glad to go back again."

"And you, Maria?"

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"I shall be very happy there, father, but I like Venice best."

"You are getting to an age to enjoy gaiety, Maria; and it is natural you should do so. However, it will not be necessary for you to be long absent. In a city like Venice there are always fresh subjects for talk, and the most exciting piece of scandal is but a three days' wonder. A few weeks at Corfu will restore your nerves, which cannot but have been shaken by what you have gone through, and you will come back here more disposed than ever to appreciate the gaieties of Venice."

"As long as it is for only a few weeks, father, I shall not care; for you know I am very fond, too, of our beautiful home there. Still I do like Venice."

They had now reached the steps of the Palazzo Polani. They had not proceeded by way of the Grand Canal, as the merchant was anxious that his daughters should reach their home unrecognized, as, had they been noticed, it would have given rise to no little excitement, and they had had more than enough of this, and needed quiet and repose. Besides, until the prisoners were in the safe custody of the officials of the state it was in every way desirable that the events of the morning should remain unknown.

Their return home created quite a tumult of joy in the house. The preparations that had been made had been kept a profound secret, as the merchant could not be sure but that some other member of his household was in the pay of Mocenigo. Thus until the girls alighted at the steps none in the house were aware that any clue had been obtained as to their hiding-place. The women ran down with cries of joy; the men would have shouted and cheered, had not Polani held up his hand.

"The signoras have had more than enough excitement," he said. "They are grateful to you for your good-will and affection, but for the present they need quiet. They may have

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more to go through to-day. I pray you that no word as to their return be said outside the house. I would not that the news were whispered in the city till the seignory decide what is to be done in the matter."

As soon as the girls had gone upstairs to their rooms the ship's boat came alongside and the prisoners were carried into the house, glances of indignation and anger being cast at the gouvernante, who had, as soon as she was placed on board the boat, closely veiled herself; and some of the women broke out into threats and imprecations.

"Captain Lontano, the servants will show you a room where your men can guard the prisoners. You had better remain with them yourself. Let no one except your own men enter the room."

Giuseppi was on the steps, and Francis stepped up to him and eagerly asked, "What news of the gondola?"

"I found her stove in and full of water behind the piles close to the steps. Someone must have pushed her there to be out of the way of the traffic. She has several holes in her bottom, besides being stove in at the gunwale where the other boat struck her. They must have thrust the ends of their oars through her planks out of sheer spite when they found that we had escaped them. Father and I have towed her round to your steps, but I doubt whether she is worth repairing."

"Well, we can't help it, Giuseppi. She has done her work; and if every two ducats I lay out were to bring in as good a harvest I should have no reason to complain."

Having seen the prisoners safely placed, the merchant returned.

"I think, Francisco, you must go with me. They will be sure to want to question you."

"I shall have to say what were my reasons for thinking your daughters were hid in that hut, signor," Francis said as

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the gondola rowed towards St. Mark's; "and I can only do that by telling of that secret meeting. I do not want to denounce a number of people besides Ruggiero. I have no evidence against them, and do not know what they were plotting, nor have I any wish to create for myself more enemies. It is quite enough to have incurred the enmity of all the connections of the house of Mocenigo."

"That is true enough, Francisco, but I do not see how it is to be avoided; unfortunately you did recognize others besides Ruggiero."

"Quite so, signor, and I am not going to tell a lie about it, whatever the consequences may be; still I wish I could get out of it."

"I wish you could, Francis, but I do not see any escape for it, especially as you say you did not recognize Ruggiero as the passenger you carried."

"No, signor, I did not; it might have been he, but I cannot say; he was wrapped in a cloak, and I did not see his features."

"It is a pity, Francisco, for had you known him the statement that, moved by curiosity, you followed him and saw him into that hut, would have been sufficient without your entering into the other matter. Most of my countrymen would not hesitate about telling a lie to avoid mixing themselves up further in such a matter, for the dangers of making enemies are thoroughly appreciated here; but you are perfectly right, and I like your steady love of the truth whatever the consequences to yourself; but certainly as soon as the matter is concluded, it will be better for you to quit Venice for a time."

"Are you going to the council direct, signor?"

"No; I am going first to the magistrates to tell them that I have in my hands five persons who have been engaged in carrying off my daughters, and beg them to send at once to

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take them into their custody; then I shall go before the council and demand justice upon Mocenigo, against whom we have now conclusive evidence. You will not be wanted at the magistracy; my own evidence that I found them keeping guard over my daughters will be quite sufficient for the present, and after that the girls' evidence will be sufficient to convict them without your name appearing in the affair at all. I will try whether I cannot keep your name from appearing before the council also. Yes, I think I might do that; and as a first step I give you my promise not to name you unless I find it absolutely necessary. You may as well remain here in the gondola until I return."

It was upwards of an hour before Signor Polani came back to the boat.

"I have succeeded," he said, "in keeping your name out of it. I first of all told my daughters' story, and then said that, having obtained information that Ruggiero, before he was banished from Venice, was in the habit of going sometimes at night to a hut on San Nicolo, I proceeded thither, and found my daughters concealed in the hut whose position had been described to me. Of course they inquired where I had obtained the information; but I replied that, as they knew, I had offered a large reward which would lead to my daughters' discovery, and that this reward had attracted one in the secret of Mocenigo, but that for the man's own safety I had been compelled to promise that I would not divulge his name.

"Some of the council were inclined to insist, but others pointed out that for the ends of justice it mattered in no way how I obtained the information. I had at any rate gone to the island and found my daughters there; and their evidence, if it was in accordance with what I had stated, was amply sufficient to bring the guilt of the abduction of my daughters home to Ruggiero, against whom other circumstances

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had already excited suspicion. A galley has already started for the mainland with orders to bring him back a prisoner, and the girls are to appear to give evidence to-morrow; the woman Castaldi is to be interrogated by the council this afternoon, and I have no doubt she will make a full confession, seeing that my daughters' evidence is in itself sufficient to prove her guilt, and that it can be proved from other sources that it was she who inveigled them away by a false message from me."

"I am glad indeed, signor, that I am not to be called, and that this affair of the conspiracy is not to be brought up. I would with your permission now return home. Giuseppi took a message to my father from me the first thing explaining my absence, and I told him when we left your house to go at once to tell him that your daughters had been recovered, and that I should return before long. Still he will want to hear from me as to the events of the night."

"Will you also tell him, Francisco, that I will call upon him this afternoon. I have much to say to him."

"I am glad Signor Polani is coming," Mr. Hammond said when his son gave him the message. "I am quite resolved that you shall quit Venice at once. I do not wish to blame you for what you have done, which, indeed, is likely to have a favourable effect upon your fortunes; but that at your age you have mixed yourself up in adventures of this kind, taken part in the affairs of great houses, and drawn upon yourself the enmity of one of the most powerful families of Venice, is altogether strange and improper for a lad of your years and belonging to the family of a quiet trader. I have been thinking about it all this morning, and am quite resolved that the sooner you are out of Venice the better; if I saw any way of sending you off before nightfall I would do so.

"Signor Polani has, you say, so far concealed from the

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council the fact that you have been mixed up in this business; but there is no saying how soon it may come out. You know that Venice swarms with spies, and these are likely before many hours to learn the fact of your midnight arrival at Polani's house; and as no orders were given for the preparation of this expedition to the island before that time, it will not need much penetration to conclude that you were the bearer of the news that led to the discovery of the maidens; besides which, you accompanied the expedition and acted as its guide to the hut. Part of this they will learn from the servants of the house, part of it they may get out from the sailors, who, over their wine-cups, are not given to reticence. The council may not have pressed Polani on this point, but, take my word for it, some of them at least will endeavour to get to the bottom of it, especially Mocenigo's connections, who will naturally be alarmed at the thought that there is somewhere a traitor among their own ranks.

"The affair has become very serious, Francis, and far beyond the compass of a boyish scrape, and no time must be lost in getting you out of Venice. I have no doubt Polani will see the matter in the same light, for he knows the ways of his countrymen even better than I do."

The interview between the two traders was a long one; at its conclusion Francis was sent for.

"Francis," his father said, "Signor Polani has had the kindness to make me offers of a most generous nature."

"Not at all, Messer Hammond," the Venetian interrupted; "let there be no mistake upon that score. Your son has rendered me services impossible for me ever to repay adequately. He has laid me under an obligation greater than I can ever discharge. At the same time, fortunately, I am in a position to be able to further his interests in life. I have proposed, Francisco, that you shall enter my house at once. You will, of

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course, for some years learn the business, but you will do so in the position which a son of mine would occupy, and when you come of age you will take your place as a partner with me.

"Your father will return to England. He informs me that he is now longing to return to his own country, and has for some time been thinking of doing so. I have proposed to him that he shall act as my agent there. Hitherto I have not traded direct with England; in future I shall do so largely. Your father has explained to me somewhat of his transactions, and I see there is good profit to be made on trade with London by a merchant who has the advantage of the advice and assistance of one, like your father, thoroughly conversant in the trade. Thus I hope that the arrangement will be largely to our mutual advantage. As to yourself, you will probably be reluctant to establish yourself for life in this country; but there is no reason why in time, when your father wishes to retire from business, you should not establish yourself in London in charge of the English branch of our house."

"I am most grateful to you for your offer, signor, which is vastly beyond anything that my ambition could ever have aspired to. I can only say that I will try my best to do justice to your kindness to me."

"I have no fear as to that, Francisco," the merchant said; "you have shown so much thoughtfulness in this business that I shall have no fear of intrusting even weighty affairs of business in your hands; and you must remember always that I shall still consider myself your debtor. I thoroughly agree with your father's views as to the necessity for your leaving Venice as soon as possible. In a few months this matter will have blown over, the angry feelings excited will calm down, and you will then be able to come and go in safety; but at present you were best out of the town, and I have therefore arranged with your father that you shall embark to-night

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on board the *Bonito*, which sails to-morrow. You will have much to say to your father now, but I hope you will find time to come round and say good-bye to my daughters this evening."

"Your adventures, Francis," Mr. Hammond said when the merchant had left them, "have turned out fortunate indeed. You have an opening now beyond anything we could have hoped for. Signor Polani has expressed himself most warmly. He told me that I need concern myself no further with your future, for that would now be his affair. The arrangement that he has made with me will enable me to hold my head as high as any in the City, for it will give me almost a monopoly of the Venetian trade; and although he said that he had long been thinking of entering into trade direct with England, there is no doubt that it is his feeling towards you which has influenced him now in the matter.

"My business here has more than answered my expectations in one respect, but has fallen short in another. I have bought cheaply, and the business should have been a very profitable one; but my partner in London is either not acting fairly by me, or he is mismanaging matters altogether. This offer, then, of Signor Polani is in every respect acceptable. I shall give up my own business and start anew, and selling, as I shall, on commission shall run no risk, while the profits will be far larger than I could myself make, for Polani will carry it on on a great scale. As for you, you will soon learn the ways of trade, and will be able to come home and join me, and eventually succeed me in the business.

"No fairer prospect could well open to a young man, and if you show yourself as keen in business as you have been energetic in the pursuits you have adopted, assuredly a great future is open to you, and you may look to be one of the greatest merchants in the city of London. I know not yet what offers

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Polani may make you here, but I hope that you will not settle in Venice permanently, but will always remember that you are an Englishman and the son of a London citizen, and that you will never lose your love for your native land. And yet do not hurry home for my sake. Your two brothers will soon have finished their schooling, and will, of course, be apprenticed to me as soon as I return; and if, as I hope, they turn out steady and industrious they will, by the time they come to man's estate, be of great assistance to me in the business. And now, you will be wanting to say good-bye to your friends. Be careful this last evening, for it is just when you are thinking most of other matters that sudden misfortune is likely to come upon you."

Delighted with his good fortune—rather because it opened up a life of activity instead of the confinement to business that he had dreaded, than for the pecuniary advantages it offered—Francis ran down-stairs, and leaping into his father's gondola told Beppo to take him to the Palazzo Giustiniani. On the way he told Beppo and his son that the next day he was leaving Venice, and was going to enter the service of Signor Polani. Giuseppi ceased rowing, and, throwing himself down at the bottom of the gondola, began to sob violently, with the abandonment to his emotions common to his race; then he suddenly sat up.

"If you are going, I will go too, Messer Francisco. You will want a servant who will be faithful to you. I will ask the padrone to let me go with you. You will let me go, will you not, father? I cannot leave our young master, and should pine away were I obliged to stop here to work a gondola, while he may be wanting my help, for Messer Francisco is sure to get into adventures and dangers. Has he not done it here in Venice? and is he not sure to do it at sea, where there are Genoese and pirates, and perils of all kinds? You will take me with you,

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will you not, Messer Francisco? You will never be so hard-hearted as to go away and leave me behind?"

"I shall be very glad to have you with me, Giuseppi, if your father will give you leave to go. I am quite sure that Signor Polani will make no objection. In the first place, he would do it to oblige me, and in the second, I know that it is his intention to do something to your advantage. He has spoken to me about it several times, for you had your share of the danger when we first rescued his daughters, and again when we were chased by that four-oared gondola. He has been too busy with the search for his daughters to give the matter his attention, but I know that he is conscious of his obligation to you, and that he intends to reward you largely; therefore I am sure that he will offer no objection to your accompanying me. What do you say, Beppo?"

"I do not like to stand in the way of the lad's wishes, Messer Francisco, but, you see, he is of an age now to be very useful to me. If Giuseppi leaves me I shall have to hire another hand for the gondola, or to take a partner."

"Well, we will talk it over presently," Francis said. "Here we are at the steps of the palazzo, and here comes Matteo himself. It is lucky I was not five minutes later, or I should have missed him."

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CHAPTER VII.

ON BOARD A TRADER.

"HAVE you heard the news, Francisco? My cousins are rescued! I have been out this morning and have only just heard it, and I was on the point of starting to tell you."

"Your news is old, Matteo. I knew it hours ago."

"And I hear," Matteo went on, "that Polani found them in a hut on San Nicolo. My father cannot think how he came to hear of their hiding-place; he says Polani would not say how he learned the news. My father supposes he heard it from some member of Ruggiero's household."

Francis hesitated for a moment. He had at first been on the point of telling Matteo of the share he had had in the recovery of the girls; but he thought that although his friend could be trusted not to repeat the news wilfully, he might accidentally say something which would lead to the fact being known, and that as Polani had strongly enjoined the necessity of keeping the secret, and had himself declined to mention, even to the council, the source from which he obtained his information, he would look upon him as a babbler and unworthy of trust did he find that Matteo had been let into the secret.

"It does not much matter who it is Polani learned the news from. The great point is he has found his daughters safe from

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all injury, and I hear has brought back with him the woman who betrayed them. It is fortunate indeed that he took such prompt measures with Ruggiero, and thus prevented his escaping from the mainland and making off with the girls, as of course he intended to do."

"My father tells me," Matteo said, "that a state gondola has already been despatched to bring Ruggiero a prisoner here, and that even his powerful connections will not save him from severe punishment, for public indignation is so great at the attempt that his friends will not venture to plead on his behalf."

"And now I have my bit of news to tell you, Matteo. Signor Polani has most generously offered me a position in his house, and I am to sail to-morrow in one of his ships for the East."

"I congratulate you, Francisco, for I know from what you have often said that you would like this much better than going back to England. But it seems very sudden; you did not know anything about it yesterday, and now you are going to start at once. Why, when can it have been settled? Polani has been absent since daybreak, engaged in this matter of the girls, and has been occupied ever since with the council."

"I have seen him since he returned," Francis replied; "and though it was only absolutely settled this morning, he has had several interviews with my father on the subject. I believe he and my father thought that it was better to get me away as soon as possible, as Ruggiero's friends may put down the disgrace which has befallen him to my interference in his first attempt to carry off the girls."

"Well, I think you are a lucky fellow anyhow, Francisco, and I hope that I may be soon doing something also. I shall speak to my father about it, and ask him to get Polani to let me take some voyages in his vessels, so that I may be fit to become an officer in one of the state galleys as soon as I am of age. Where are you going now?"

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"I am going round to the School of Arms to say good-bye to our comrades; after that I am going to Signor Polani's to pay my respects to the signoras; then I shall be at home with my father till it is time to go on board. He will have left here before I return from my voyage, as he is going to wind up his affairs at once and return to England."

"Well, I will accompany you to the school and to my cousin's," Matteo said. "I shall miss you terribly here, and shall certainly do all I can to follow your example and get afloat. You may have all sorts of adventures, for we shall certainly be at war with Genoa before many weeks are over, and you will have to keep a sharp look-out for their war galleys. Polani's ships are prizes worth taking, and you may have the chance of seeing the inside of a Genoese prison before you return."

After a visit to the School of Arms the two friends were rowed to Signor Polani's. The merchant himself was out, but they were at once shown up to the room where the girls were sitting.

"My dear cousins," Matteo said as he entered, "I am delighted to see you back safe and well. All Venice is talking of your return. You are the heroines of the day. You do not know what an excitement there has been over your adventure."

"The sooner people get to talk about something else the better, Matteo," Maria said, "for we shall have to be prisoners all day till something else occupies their attention. We have not the least desire to be pointed at, whenever we go out, as the maidens who were carried away. If the Venetians were so interested in us, they had much better have set about discovering where we were hidden away before."

"But everyone did try, I can assure you, Maria. Every place has been ransacked, high and low. Every gondolier has been questioned and cross-questioned as to his doings on that

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day. Every fishing village has been visited. Never was such a search, I do believe. But who could have thought of your being hidden away all the time at San Nicolo! As for me, I have spent most of my time in a gondola, going out and staring up at every house I passed, in hopes of seeing a handkerchief waved from a casement. And so has Francisco; he has been just as busy in the search as anyone, I can assure you."

"Francisco is different," Maria said, not observing the signs Francis was making for her to be silent. "Francisco has got eyes in his head and a brain in his skull, which is more, it seems, than any of the Venetians have; and had he not brought father to our hiding-place, there we should have remained until Ruggiero Mocenigo came and carried us away."

"Francisco brought your father the news!" Matteo exclaimed in astonishment. "Why, was it he who found you out, after all?"

"Did you not know that, Matteo? Of course it was Francisco! As I told you, he has got brains; and if it had not been for him we should certainly never have been rescued. Giulia and I owe him everything—don't we, Giulia?"

"Forgive me for not telling you, Matteo," Francis said to his astonished friend; "but Signor Polani and my father both impressed upon me so strongly that I should keep silent as to my share in the business, that I thought it better not even to mention it to you at present. It was purely the result of an accident."

"It was nothing of the sort," Maria said; "it was the result of your keeping your eyes open and knowing how to put two and two together. I did not know, Francisco, that it was a secret. We have not seen our father since we have returned, and I suppose he thought we should see nobody until he saw us again, and so did not tell us that we were not to mention your name in the affair; but we will be careful in future."

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"But how was it, Francisco?" Matteo asked. "Now I know so much as this, I suppose I can be told the rest. I can understand well enough why it was to be kept a secret, and why my cousin is anxious to get you out of Venice at once."

Francis related the manner in which he first became acquainted with the existence of the hut on the island and the fact of its being frequented by Ruggiero Mocenigo, and how, on catching sight of the gouvernante in a gondola, and seeing her make out across the lagoons, the idea struck him that the girls were confined in the hut.

"It is all very simple, you see, Matteo," he concluded.

"I will never say anything against learning to row a gondola in future," Matteo said, "for it seems to lead to all sorts of adventures; and unless you could have rowed well, you would never have got back to tell the story. But it is certain that it is a good thing you are leaving Venice for a time, for Ruggiero's friends may find out the share you had in it from some of my cousin's servants. You may be sure that they will do their best to discover how he came to be informed of the hiding-place, and he is quite right to send you off at once."

"What! are you going away, Francisco?" the two girls exclaimed together.

"I am sailing to-morrow in one of your father's ships, signoras."

"And you are not coming back again?" Maria exclaimed.

"I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you again before very long, signora. I am entering your father's service for good, and shall be backwards and forwards to Venice as the ship comes and goes. My father is returning to England, and Signor Polani has most kindly requested me to make my home with him whenever I am in port."

"That is better," Maria said. "We should have a pretty

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quarrel with papa if he had let you go away altogether, after what you have done for us—shouldn't we, Giulia?"

But Giulia had walked away to the window, and did not seem to hear the question.

"That will be very pleasant," Maria went on; "for you will be back every two or three months, and I shall take good care that papa does not send the ship off in a hurry again. It will be almost as good as having a brother; and I look upon you almost as a brother now, Francisco—and a very good brother too. I don't think that man will molest us any more. If I thought there was any chance of it, I should ask papa to keep you for a time, because I should feel confident that you would manage to protect us somehow."

"I do not think there is the slightest chance of more trouble from him," Francis said. "He is sure of a long term of imprisonment for carrying you off."

"That is the least they can do to him, I should think," Maria said indignantly. "I certainly shall not feel comfortable while he is at large."

After half an hour's talk Francis and his friend took their leave.

"You certainly were born with a silver spoon in your mouth," Matteo said as they took their seats in the gondola, "and my cousin does well to get you out of Venice at once, for I can tell you there are scores of young fellows who would feel jealous at your position with my cousins."

"Nonsense!" Francis said, colouring. "How can you talk so absurdly, Matteo? I am only a boy, and it will be years before I could think of marriage. Besides, your cousins are said to be the richest heiresses in Venice; and it is not because I have been able to be of some slight service to them that I should venture to think of either of them in that way."

"We shall see," Matteo laughed. "Maria is a little too

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old for you, I grant, but Giulia will do very well; and as you have already come, as Maria says, to be looked upon by them as a brother and protector, there is no saying as to how she may regard you in another two or three years."

"The thing is absurd, Matteo," Francis said impatiently; "do not talk such nonsense any more."

Matteo lay back in his seat and whistled.

"I will say no more about it at present, Francisco," he said, after a pause; "but I must own that I should be well content to stand as high in the good graces of my pretty cousins as you do."

The next morning Francis spent some time with his father talking over future arrangements.

"I have no doubt that I shall see you sometimes, Francis; for Polani will be sure to give you an opportunity of making a trip to England from time to time, in one of his ships trading thither. Unless anything unexpected happens, your future appears assured. Polani tells me he shall always regard you in the light of a son; and I have no fear of your doing anything to cause him to forfeit his good opinion of you. Do not be over adventurous, for even in a merchant ship there are many perils to be met with. Pirates swarm in the Mediterranean, in spite of the efforts of Venice to suppress them; and when war is going on, both Venice and Genoa send out numbers of ships whose doings savour strongly of piracy. Remember that the first duty of the captain of a merchant ship is to save his vessel and cargo, and that he should not think of fighting unless he sees no other method of escape open to him.

"It is possible that, after a time, I may send one of your brothers out here, but that will depend upon what I find of their disposition when I get home; for it will be worse than useless to send a lad of a headstrong disposition out to the care of one but a few years older than himself. But this we can talk

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about when you come over to England, and we see what position you are occupying here. I fear that Venice is about to enter upon a period of great difficulty and danger. There can be little doubt that Genoa, Padua, and Hungary are leagued against her; and powerful as she is, and great as are her resources, they will be taxed to the utmost to carry her through the dangers that threaten her. However, I have faith in her future, and believe that she will weather the storm, as she has done many that have preceded it.

"Venice has the rare virtue of endurance—the greatest dangers, the most disastrous defeats, fail to shake her courage, and only arouse her to greater efforts. In this respect she is in the greatest contrast to her rival, Genoa, who always loses heart the moment the tide turns against her. No doubt this is due, in no slight extent, to her oligarchic form of government. The people see the nobles, who rule them, calm and self-possessed, however great the danger, and remain confident and tranquil; while in Genoa each misfortune is the signal for a struggle between contending factions. The occasion is seized to throw blame and contumely upon those in power, and the people give way to alternate outbursts of rage and depression.

"I do not say there are no faults in the government of Venice, but taking her altogether there is no government in Europe to compare with it. During the last three hundred years the history of every other city in Italy, I may say of every other nation in Europe, is one long record of intestine struggle and bloodshed, while in Venice there has not been a single popular tumult worthy of the name. It is to the strength, the firmness, and the moderation of her government that Venice owes her advancement, the respect in which she is held among nations, as much as to the commercial industry of her people.

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"She alone among nations could for years have withstood the interdict of the pope, or the misfortunes that have sometimes befallen her. She alone has never felt the foot of the invader, or bent her neck beneath a foreign yoke to preserve her existence. Here, save only in matters of government, all opinions are free, strangers of all nationalities are welcome. It is a grand city and a grand people, Francis, and though I shall be glad to return to England I cannot but feel regret at leaving it. And now, my boy, it is time to be going off to your ship. Polani said she would sail at ten o'clock. It is now nine, and it will take you half an hour to get there. I am glad to hear that Giuseppi is going with you; the lad is faithful and attached to you, and may be of service. Your trunk has already been sent on board, so let us be going."

On arriving at the ship, which was lying in the port of Malamocco they found that she was just ready for sailing, the last bales of goods were being hoisted on board, and the sailors were preparing to loosen the sails.

The *Bonito* was a large vessel, built for stowage rather than speed. She carried two masts with large square sails, and before the wind would probably proceed at a fair rate; but the art of sailing close-hauled was then unknown, and in the event of the wind being unfavourable she would be forced either to anchor or to depend upon her oars, of which she rowed fifteen on either side. As they mounted on to the deck they were greeted by Polani himself.

"I have come off to see the last of your son, Messer Hammond, and to make sure that my orders for his comfort have been carried out. Captain Corpadio, this is the young gentleman of whom I have spoken to you, and who is to be treated in all respects as if he were my son. You will instruct him in all matters connected with the navigation of the ship, as well as in the mercantile portion of the business, the best

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methods of buying and selling, the prices of goods and the methods of payment. This is your cabin, Francisco."

He opened the door of a roomy cabin in the poop of the ship. It was fitted up with every luxury.

"Thank you very much indeed, Signor Polani," Francis said. "The only fault is that it is too comfortable. I would as lief have roughed it as other aspirants have to do."

"There was no occasion, Francisco. When there is rough work to be done you will, I have no doubt, do it; but as you are going to be a trader, and not a sailor, there is no occasion that you should do so more than is necessary. You will learn to command a ship just as well as if you began by dipping your hands in tar. And it is well that you should learn to do this, for unless a man can sail a vessel himself he is not well qualified to judge of the merits of men he appoints to be captains; but you must remember that you are going as a representative of my house, and must, therefore, travel in accordance with that condition. You will be sorry to hear that bad news has just been received from the mainland. The state galley sent to fetch Ruggiero Mocenigo has arrived with the news that on the previous night a strong party of men who are believed to have come from Padua, fell upon the guard and carried off Ruggiero. My sailors came up and fought stoutly, but they were overpowered, and several of them were killed; so Ruggiero is again at large.

"This is a great disappointment to me. Though the villain is not likely to show his face in the Venetian territory again, I shall be anxious until Maria is safely married, and shall lose no time in choosing a husband for her. Unless I am mistaken her liking is turned in the direction of Rufino, brother of your friend Matteo Giustiniani, and as I like none better among the suitors for her hand, methinks that by the time you return you will find that they are betrothed. And now I hear

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the sailors are heaving the anchor, and therefore, Messer Hammond, it is time we took to our boats."

There was a parting embrace between Francis and his father. Then the merchants descended into their gondolas, and lay waiting alongside until the anchor was up, the great sails shaken out, and the *Bonito* began to move slowly through the water towards the entrance of the port; then, with a final wave of the hand, the gondolas rowed off, and Francis turned to look at his surroundings. The first object that met his eye was Giuseppi, who was standing near him waving his cap to his father.

"Well, Giuseppi, what do you think of this?"

"I don't know what to think yet, Messer Francisco; it all seems so big and solid one does not feel as if one was on the water, it's more like living in a house. It does not seem as if anything could move her."

"You will find the waves can move her about when we get fairly to sea, Giuseppi, and the time will come when you will think our fast gondola was a steady craft in comparison. How long have you been on board?"

"I came off three hours ago, signor, with the boat that brought the furniture for your cabin. I have been putting that to rights since. A supply of the best wine has been sent off, and extra stores of all sorts, so you need not be afraid of being starved on the voyage."

"I wish he hadn't sent so much," Francis said; "it makes one feel like a milksop. Whose cabin is it I have got?"

"I believe that it is the cabin usually used by the supercargo who is in charge of the goods and does the trading, but the men say the captain of this ship has been a great many years in Polani's employment, and often sails without a supercargo, being able to manage the trading perfectly well by himself; but the usual cabin is only half the size of yours, and two have been thrown into one to make it light and airy."

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"And where do you sleep, Giuseppi?"

"I am going to sleep in the passage outside your door, Messer Francisco."

"Oh, but I sha'n't like that!" Francis said; "you ought to have a better place than that."

Giuseppi laughed.

"Why, Messer Francisco, considering that half my time I slept in the gondola, and the other half on some straw in our kitchen, I shall do capitally. Of course I could sleep in the fo'castle with the crew if I liked, but I should find it hot and stifling there. I chose the place myself, and asked the captain if I could sleep there, and he has given me leave."

In an hour the *Bonito* had passed through the Malamocco Channel and was out on the broad sea. The wind was very light, and but just sufficient to keep the great sails bellied out. The sailors were all at work, coiling down ropes, washing the decks, and making everything clean and tidy.

"This is a good start, Messer Hammond," the captain said, coming up to him; "if this wind holds we shall be able to make our course round the southern point of Greece and then on to Candia, which is our first port. I always like a light breeze when I first go out of port, it gives time for everyone to get at home and have things ship-shape before we begin to get lively."

"She does not look as if she would ever get lively," Francis said, looking at the heavy vessel.

"She is lively enough in a storm, I can tell you," the captain said, laughing; "when she once begins to roll she does it in earnest, but she is a fine sea boat, and I have no fear of gales. I wish I could say as much of pirates; however, she has always been fortunate, and as we carry a stout crew she could give a good account of herself against any of the small piratical vessels that swarm among the islands, although, of course, if

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she fell in with two or three of them together it would be awkward."

"How many men do you carry altogether, captain?"

"Just seventy. You see she rows thirty oars, and in case of need we put two men to each oar, and though she doesn't look fast she can get along at a fine rate when the oars are double-banked. We have shown them our heels many a time, for our orders are strict, we are never to fight if we can get away by running."

"But I suppose you have to fight sometimes?" Francis asked.

"Yes, I have been in some tough fights several times, though not in the *Bonito*, which was only built last year. Once in the *Lion* we were attacked by three pirates. We were at anchor in a bay, and the wind was blowing on the shore, when they suddenly came round the headland, so there was no chance of running, and we had to fight it out. We fought for five hours before they sheered off pretty well crippled, and one of them in flames, for we carried Greek fire.

"Three or four times they nearly got a footing on deck, but we managed to beat them off somehow. We lost a third of our crew. I don't think there was a man escaped without a wound. I was laid up for three months after I got home with a slash on the shoulder, which pretty nigh took off my left arm. However, we saved the ship and the cargo, which was a valuable one, and Messer Polani saw that no one was the worse for his share in the business. There's no more liberal hearted man in the trade than he is, and whatever may be the scarcity of hands in the port there is never any difficulty in getting a good crew together for his vessels.

"Of course there are the roughs with the smooths. Some years ago I was in prison for six months with all my crew in Azoff. It was the work of those rascally Genoese, who are always doing us a bad turn when they have the chance,

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even when we are at peace with them. They set the mind of the native khan—that is the prince of the country—against us by some lying stories that we had been engaged in smuggling goods in at another port. And suddenly, in the middle of the night, in marched his soldiers on board my ship and two other Venetian craft lying in the harbour, and took possession of them, and shut us all up in prison. There we were till Messer Polani got news and sent out another ship to pay the fine demanded. That was no joke, I can tell you, for the prison was so hot and crowded, and the food so bad, that we got fever, and pretty near half of us died before our ransom came. Then at Constantinople the Genoese stirred the people up against us once or twice, and all the sailors ashore had to fight for their lives. Those Genoese are always doing us mischief."

"But I suppose you do them mischief sometimes, captain? I imagine it isn't all one side?"

"Of course we pay them out when we get a chance," the captain replied. "It isn't likely we are going to stand being always put upon, and not take our chance when it comes. We only want fair trade and no favour, while those rascals want it all to themselves. They know they have no chance with us when it comes to fair trading."

"You know, captain, that the Genoese say just the same things about the Venetians that the Venetians do about them. So I expect that there are faults on both sides."

The captain laughed.

"I suppose each want to have matters their own way, Messer Hammond, but I don't consider the Genoese have any right to come interfering with us to the eastward of Italy. They have got France and Spain to trade with, and all the western parts of Italy. Why don't they keep there? Besides, I look upon them as landsmen. Why, we can always lick them at sea in a fair fight."

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"Generally, captain; I admit you generally thrash them; still, you know they have sometimes got the better of you, even when the force was equal."

The captain grunted. He could not deny the fact.

"Sometimes our captains don't do their duty," he said. "They put a lot of young patricians in command of the galleys, men that don't know one end of a ship from the other, and then, of course, we get the worst of it. But I maintain that, properly fought, a Venetian ship is always more than a match for a Genoese."

"I think she generally is, captain, and I hope it will always prove so in the future. You see, though I am English I have lived long enough in Venice to feel like a Venetian."

"I have never been to England," the captain said, "though a good many Venetian ships go there every year. They tell me it's an island, like Venice, only a deal bigger than any we have got in the Mediterranean. Those who have been there say the sea is mighty stormy, and that sailing up from Spain you get tremendous tempests sometimes, with the waves ever so much bigger than we have here, and longer and more regular, but not so trying to the ships as the short sharp gales of these seas."

"I believe that is so, captain, though I don't know anything about it myself. It is some years since I came out, and our voyage was a very calm one."

Three days of quiet sailing and the *Bonito* rounded the headlands of the Morea, and shaped her course to Candia. The voyage was a very pleasant one to Francis. Each day the captain brought out the list of cargo and instructed him in the prices of each description of goods, told him of the various descriptions of merchandise which they would be likely to purchase at the different ports at which they were to touch, and the prices which they would probably have to pay for them.

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A certain time, too, was devoted each day to the examination of the charts of the various ports and islands, the captain pointing out the marks which were to be observed on entering and leaving the harbours, the best places for anchorage, and the points where shelter could be obtained should high winds come on.

After losing sight of the Morea the weather changed, clouds banked up rapidly in the south-west, and the captain ordered the great sails to be furled.

"We are going to have a serious gale," he said to Francis, "which is unusual at this period of the year. I have thought for the last two days we were going to have a change, but I hoped to have reached Candia before the gale burst upon us. I fear that this will drive us off our course."

By evening it was blowing hard, and the sea got up rapidly. The ship speedily justified the remarks of the captain on her power of rolling, and the oars, at which the men had been labouring since the sails were furled, were laid in.

"It is impossible to keep our course," the captain said, "and we must run up among the islands, and anchor under the lee of one of them. I should recommend you to get into your bed as soon as possible, you have not learned to keep your legs in a storm. I see that lad of yours is very ill already, but as you show no signs of suffering thus far you will probably escape."

It was some time, however, before Francis went below. The scene was novel to him, and he was astonished at the sight of the waves, and at the manner in which they tossed the great ship about, as if she were an egg-shell; but when it became quite dark, and he could see nothing but the white crests of the waves and the foam that flew high in the air every time the bluff bows of the ship plunged down into a hollow, he took the captain's advice and retired to his cabin. He was on deck again early. A gray mist overhung the water; the sea was of a leaden colour, crested with white heads; the waves were far

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ON BOARD THE "BONITO" IN A STORM.

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higher than they had been on the previous evening, and as they came racing along behind the *Bonito* each crest seemed as if it would rise over her stern and overwhelm her; but this apprehension was soon dispelled, as he saw how lightly the vessel rose each time. Although showing but a very small breadth of sail, she was running along at a great rate, leaving a white streak of foam behind her. The captain was standing near the helm, and Francis made his way to him.

"Well, captain, and how are you getting on, and where are we?" he asked, cheerfully.

"We are getting on well enough, Messer Francisco, as you can see for yourself. The *Bonito* is as good a sea boat as ever floated, and would not care for the wind were it twice as strong as it is. It is not the storm I am thinking about, but the islands. If we were down in the Mediterranean I could turn into my cot and sleep soundly; but here it is another matter. We are somewhere up among the islands, but where no man can say. The wind has shifted a bit two or three times during the night, and, as we are obliged to run straight before it, there is no calculating to within a few miles where we are. I have tried to edge out to the westward as much as I could, but with this wind blowing and the height of the ship out of water, we sag away to leeward so fast that nothing is gained by it.

"According to my calculation we cannot be very far from the west coast of Mitylene. If the clouds would but lift and give us a look round for two minutes we should know all about it, as I know the outline of every island in the Ægean; and as over on this side you are always in sight of two or three of them, I should know all about it if I could get a view of the land. Now, for aught we know, we may be running straight down upon some rocky coast."

The idea was not a pleasant one, and Francis strained his eyes, gazing through the mist.

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"What should we do if we saw land, captain?" he asked presently.

"Get out the oars, row her head round, and try to work either to the right or left, whichever point of land seemed easiest to weather. Of course if it was the mainland we were being driven on there would be no use, and we should try and row into the teeth of the gale, so as to keep her off land as long as possible, in the hope of the wind dropping. When we got into shallow water we should drop our anchors and still keep on rowing to lessen the strain upon them. If they gave, there would be an end to the *Bonito*. But if, as I think, we are driving towards Mitylene, there is a safe harbour on this side of the island, and I shall certainly run into it. It is well sheltered and landlocked."

Two more hours passed, and then there was a startling transformation. The clouds broke suddenly and cleared off, as if by magic, and the sun streamed brightly out. The wind was blowing as strong as ever, but the change in the hue of sky and sea would at once have raised the spirits of the tired crew had not a long line of land been seen stretching ahead of them at a distance of four or five miles.

"Just as I thought," the captain exclaimed as he saw it. "That is Mitylene sure enough, and the entrance to the harbour I spoke of lies away there on that beam."

The oars were at once got out, the sail braced up a little, and the *Bonito* made for the point indicated by the captain, who himself took the helm. Another half-hour and they were close to land. Francis could see no sign of a port, but in a few minutes the *Bonito* rounded the end of a low island and a passage opened before her. She passed through this and found herself in still water, in a harbour large enough to hold the fleet of Venice. The anchor was speedily let drop.

"It seems almost bewildering," Francis said, "the hush and

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quiet here after the turmoil of the storm outside. To whom does Mitylene belong?"

"The Genoese have a trading station and a castle at the other side of the island, but it belongs to Constantinople. The other side of the island is rich and fertile, but this, as you see, is mountainous and barren. The people have not a very good reputation, and if we had been wrecked we should have been plundered, if not murdered. You see those two vessels lying close to the shore, near the village? They are pirates when they get a chance, you may be quite sure; in fact, these islands swarm with them. Venice does all she can to keep them down, but the Genoese and the Hungarians and the rest of them keep her so busy that she has no time to take the matter properly in hand, and make a clean sweep of them."

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CHAPTER VIII.

AN ATTACK BY PIRATES.

A BOAT was lowered, and the captain went ashore with a strong crew, all armed to the teeth. Francis accompanied him. The natives were sullen in their manner, but expressed a willingness to trade, and to exchange hides and wine for cloth.

"We may as well do a little barter," the captain said, as they rowed back towards the ship. "The port is not often visited, and the road across the island is hilly and rough, so they ought to be willing to sell their goods cheaply."

"They did not seem pleased to see us, nevertheless," Francis said.

"No; you see the Genoese have got a footing in the island, and of course they represent us to the natives as being robbers, who would take their island if we got the chance. All round these coasts and islands the people are partisans either of Venice or Genoa; they care very little for Constantinople, although they form part of the empire. Constantinople taxes them heavily, and is too weak to afford them protection. Of course they are Greeks, but the Greeks of the islands have very little in common, beyond their language, with the Greeks of Constantinople. They see, too, that the Turks are increasing in power, and they know that if they are to be saved from falling into the hands of the Moslem, it is Venice or Genoa

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who will protect them, and not Constantinople, who will have enough to do to defend herself. As to themselves, they would naturally prefer Venice, because Venice is a far better mistress than Genoa; but of course, when the Genoese get a footing they spread lies as to our tyranny and greed, and so it comes that the people of the islands are divided in their wishes, and that while we are gladly received in some of them, we are regarded with hate and suspicion in others."

Trade at once began, and continued until evening.

"How long do you expect to stay here, captain?" Francis asked.

"That must depend upon the wind; it may go down to-morrow, it may continue to blow strong for days, and it is no use our attempting to work down to Candia until it changes its direction. I should hope, however, that in a day or two we may be off; we are doing little more than wasting our time here."

A strong watch was placed on deck at nightfall.

"Why, surely, captain, there is no fear of an attack! War has not yet been proclaimed with Genoa, although there is little doubt it will be so in a few weeks, or perhaps a few days."

"There is never a real peace between Venice and Genoa in these seas," the captain said, "and as war is now imminent, one cannot be too watchful. State galleys would not be attacked, but merchant vessels are different. Who is to inquire about a merchant ship! Why, if we were attacked and plundered here, who would be any the wiser! We should either have our throats cut or be sent to rot in the dungeons of Genoa. And not till there was an exchange of prisoners, perhaps years hence, would any in Venice know what had befallen us. When weeks passed, and no news came to Venice of our having reached Candia, it would be supposed that we had been lost in the storm.

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"Signor Polani would run his pen through the name of the *Bonito*, and put her down as a total loss, and there would be an end of it till those of us who were alive, when the prison doors were opened, made their way back to Venice. No, no, Messer Francisco; in these eastern waters one must always act as if the republic were at war. Why, did not Antonio Doria, in a time of profound peace, attack and seize eight Venetian ships laden with goods, killing two of the merchants on board, and putting the ships at a ransom. As to single vessels missing, and never heard of, their number is innumerable. It is all put down to pirates; but trust me, the Genoese are often at the bottom of it. They are robbers, the Genoese. In fair trade we can always beat them, and they know it, and so they are always seeking a pretext for a quarrel with us."

Francis smiled quietly at the bigoted hatred which the captain bore the Genoese, but thought it useless to argue with him. The next morning he came up on deck soon after day-break.

"I see one of those vessels has taken her departure," he said, as he glanced towards the spot where they had been lying.

"So she has," the captain said. "I had not noticed that before. I wonder what that fellow has gone for? No good, you may be sure. Why, it is blowing hard outside still, as you may see by the rate those light clouds travel. He would never have put to sea without having a motive, and he must have had a strong crew on board to row out in the teeth of the gale far enough to make off the land; that fellow is up to mischief of some sort."

A few minutes later the captain ordered a boat to be lowered and rowed out to the rocky islet at the mouth of the harbour, and landing, climbed up the rocks and looked out to sea. In half an hour he returned to the ship. "It is no use," he said to Francis; "the wind is blowing straight into the

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passage, and we could not row the *Bonito* out against it. It was different with that craft that went out yesterday evening, for I have no doubt she started as soon as it became dark. She was low in the water, and would not hold the wind; besides, no doubt they lowered the masts, and with a strong crew might well have swept her out. But with the *Bonito*, with her high sides and heavy tonnage, it could not be done."

"What do you think she went out for, captain?"

"It is likely enough that she may have gone to one of the other islands, and may return with a dozen other craft, pirates like herself. The news that a Venetian merchant ship, without consorts, is weather-bound here, would bring them upon us like bees. It is a dangerous thing, this sailing alone. I have talked it over several times with the master. Other merchants generally send their ships in companies of eight or ten, and they are then strong enough to beat off any attack of pirates. Messer Polani always sends his vessels out singly. What he says is this: 'A single ship always travels faster than a convoy, because these must go at the rate of the slowest among them; then the captain is free to go where he will, without consulting others, according as he gets news where trade is be done, and when he gets there he can drive his own bargains without the competition of other ships.'

"So you see there are advantages both ways. The padrone's ships run greater risks, but if they get through them safely they bring home much larger profits than do those of others. As a rule, I prefer sailing singly; but just at the present time I should be well pleased to see half a dozen consorts lying alongside."

Three times during the day the captain paid a visit to the rocky island. On his return for the last time before nightfall, he said to Francis:

"The wind is certainly falling; I hope that to-morrow

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morning we shall be able to get out of this trap. I am convinced that there is danger."

"You see nothing else, do you, captain, beyond the departure of that craft, to make you think that there is danger?"

"Yes, I have seen two things," the captain said. "In the first place, the demeanour of the people has changed; they do not seem more unfriendly than they were before, but as I moved about the place to-day it seemed to me that there was a suppressed excitement—people gathered together and talked earnestly, and separated if any of our crew happened to go near them; even laughed when they thought that none of us were looking, and looked serious and sullen if we turned round. I am convinced that they are expecting something to happen.

"I have another reason for suspecting it. I have kept a sharp watch on that high hill behind the village; they tell me there is nothing at the top except some curious stones, that look as if they had once been trees, so there is nothing they can want to go up for. Several times to-day I have made out the figures of men climbing that hill; when they got to the top they stood for some time as if they were looking out over the sea, and then came down again without doing anything. Now, men do not climb such a hill as that merely for exercise. They went up because they expected to see something, and that something could only be a fleet of pirate boats from the other islands. I would give a year's pay if we could get out of this place this evening, but it cannot be done, and we must wait till to-morrow morning; I will try then, even though I risk being driven on the rocks. However, if they do come to-night they will not catch us asleep."

Orders were issued that the whole crew were to remain in readiness for attack, and that those whose watch was below were to sleep with their arms beside them. The lower ports

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were all closed, a strong watch was kept on deck, and it was certain that, whatever happened, the *Bonito* would not be taken by surprise. Being assured by the captain that it was not probable that any attack would be made before morning, as the pirates, not knowing their exact position, would wait until the first gleam of daylight enabled them to make out where she was lying, and to advance in order against her, Francis lay down on his couch, leaving orders that, if asleep, he was to be called two hours before daybreak. He slept but little, however, getting up frequently and going out to ascertain if any sounds indicated the presence of an enemy. Upon one of these occasions he found that the person leaning next to him against the bulwark, and gazing towards the mouth of the harbour, was Giuseppi.

"Have you been here long, Giuseppi?"

"Since you were out last, Messer Francisco. I thought I would wait a bit and listen."

"And have you heard anything?"

"I have heard sounds several times."

"What sort of sounds, Giuseppi?"

"Such a sound as is made when the sails and yards are lowered. I have heard it over and over again when out at night on the lagoons near the port; there is no mistake in the creaking of the blocks as the halyards run through them. I am sure, that since I have been here several vessels have brought up inside the mouth of the harbour. Some of the sailors have heard the same noises, so there cannot be any mistake about it. If the captain likes, I will take a small boat and row out, and find out all about them."

"I will ask the captain, Giuseppi."

The captain, however, said that there would be no use in this being done. "Whether there are few or whether there are many of them, we must wait till morning before we go out.

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There will be no working out that channel in the dark, even if we were unopposed."

"But they must have managed to come in," Francis said.

"No doubt some of their comrades in the other barque, or people from the village, show a light out there to guide them in; besides, the wind is favourable to them and against us. No, young sir, there is nothing to do but to wait. In the morning, if there are but few of them, we will try to break through and gain the sea; if there are many we will fight here, as then all hands will be available for the combat, while if we were rowing, half of them would be occupied with the oars. If your lad were to go as he proposes he might fall into the hands of the enemy, and as the information he could gather would be in any case of no use it is best he should remain where he is."

The hours seemed long until the first tinge of daylight appeared in the sky. All hands were on deck now, for the news that vessels had been arriving in the port had convinced all that danger really threatened them. It was not until half an hour later that they were able to make out some dark objects lying in under the shadow of the islet across the mouth of the harbour.

"There they are, Messer Francisco," the captain said. "Ten of them, as far as I can make out; but there may be more, for likely enough some of them are lying side by side. There may, too, be some round a corner, where we cannot see them. Another half hour we shall know all about it."

Francis was half surprised that the captain did not order the oars to be put out and lashed in that position, for it was a recognized plan for preventing a ship from being boarded by an enemy, who could thus only approach her at the lofty poop and forecastle.

"Are you not going to get out the oars to keep them off?"

"No, Messer Francisco. In the first place, our sides are so high

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out of water that the pirates will have a difficulty in boarding us in any case. In the second place, if we get the oars out and they row full at them, sooner or later they will break them off, and it is all-important that we should be able to row. I have been thinking the matter over, and my idea is, as soon as they advance, to get three or four oars at work on either side so as to move her gradually through the water towards the harbour mouth. The rowers will be charged to let their oars swing alongside whenever any of their craft dash at them. We shall want every oar as well as our sails to get away when we are once outside. I do not think we have much chance of finally beating them off if we stop and fight here. But if we can do so for a time and can manage to creep out of the harbour, all may be well."

When daylight fairly broke they were able to make out their enemy. The vessels were of all sizes, from long, low craft, carrying great sails and long banks of oars, down to boats of a few tons burden. All seemed crowded with men.

"None of them are anything like as high out of the water as the *Bonito*," the captain said, "and they will find it very difficult to climb up our sides. Still the odds against us are serious, but we shall give them a warmer reception than they expect. They will hardly calculate either on our being so strong-handed or so well prepared for them."

Everything was indeed ready for the combat. Two or three barrels of the compound known as Greek fire had been brought up from the hold, and the cooks had heated cauldrons full of pitch. Thirty men with bows and arrows were on the poop, and the rest, with spears, axes, and swords, stood along the bulwarks.

"We may as well get as near the entrance as we can before the fight begins," the captain said. "Get up the anchor, and as soon as it is apeak get out four oars on each side."

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The anchor had already been hove short, and was soon in its place. Then the oars dipped into the water, and slowly the *Bonito* moved towards the mouth of the harbour. Scarcely had the oars touched the water than a bustle was perceived on board the piratical ships. Oars were put out, and in two or three minutes the pirates were under way, advancing at a rapid pace towards the *Bonito*.

The crew made no reply to the shouts and yells of the pirates, but, in accordance with the orders of the captain, remained in a stooping position, so that the figure of the captain, as he hauled up the flag with the lion of Venice to the mast-head, was alone visible to the pirates. As these approached volleys of arrows were shot at the *Bonito*, but not a shot replied until they were within fifty yards of the ship. Then the captain gave the word. The archers sprang to their feet, and from their eminence poured their arrows thick and fast on to the crowded decks of the pirates. The captain gave the word to the rowers, and they relinquished their oars, which swung in by the side of the vessel.

A moment later two of the largest craft of the pirates dashed alongside. The instant they did so they were saluted with showers of boiling pitch, while pots full of Greek fire were thrown down upon them. Those who tried to climb up the side of the *Bonito* were speared with lances or cut down with battle-axes. The combat was of short duration. Many of those on whom the boiling pitch had fallen jumped overboard in their agony, while others did the same to escape the Greek fire which they in vain endeavoured to extinguish.

The fire quickly spread to the woodwork, and in five minutes after the beginning of the fight the two craft dropped astern from the *Bonito* with the flames already rising fiercely from them. In the meantime the other vessels had not been idle, and a storm of missiles was poured upon the *Bonito*. The fate which

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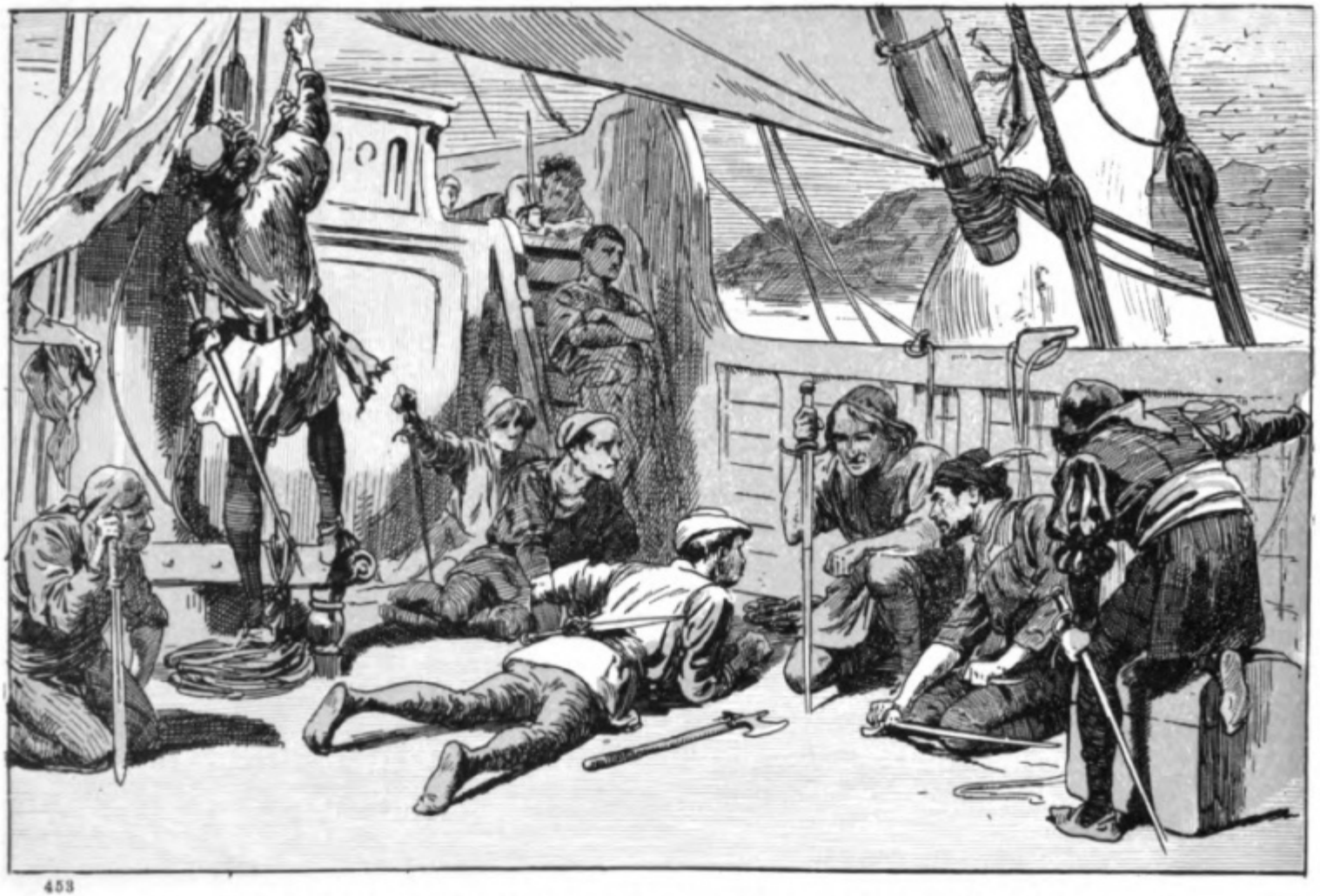

THE CREW OF THE "BONITO" SHELTERING FROM THE PIRATES' ARROWS.

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befell their comrades, however, showed them how formidable was the vessel they had regarded as an easy prey, and when the first assailants of the *Bonito* dropped astern none of the others cared to take their places.

"Man the oars again!" the captain ordered, and the *Bonito* again moved forward, her crew stooping behind the bulwarks, while the archers only rose from time to time to discharge their shafts.

"The thing I am most afraid of," the captain said to Francis, who was standing beside him, "is, that they will ram us with their prows. The *Bonito* is strongly built, but the chances are that they would knock a hole in her."

"I should think, captain, that if we were to get up some of those bales of cloth and fasten ropes to them we might lower them over the side and so break the shock."

"It is worth trying anyhow," the captain said. And a score of the sailors were at once sent down to fetch up the bales. Ropes were fastened round these, and they were laid along by the bulwarks in readiness for being lowered instantly. Ten bales were placed on each side, and three men told off to each bale.

By this time they were half-way to the mouth of the harbour, and the preparations were completed just in time, for the small boats suddenly drew aside, and two of the largest of the pirates' craft, each rowed by twenty-four oars, dashed at her, one on each side. The captain shouted the order, and the men all sprang to their feet. It was seen at once that the vessels would both strike about midships. Three bales on either side were raised to the bulwarks and lowered down with the ropes until close to the water's edge and closely touching each other. Francis sprang on to the bulwark and superintended the operations on one side, while the captain did the same on the other.

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"A few feet more astern, lads. That is right. Now, keep the bales touching. You are just in the line."

An instant later the *Bonito* reeled from the shock of two tremendous blows. The bows of the pirates were stove in, but the thick bales enabled the *Bonito* to withstand the shock, although her sides creaked, the seams started, and the water flowed in freely. But of this the crew thought little. They were occupied in hurling darts, arrows, and combustibles into the pirates as these backed off in an already sinking condition.

"Now I think we can go," the captain said, and ordered the whole of the oars to be manned.

They were speedily got out, and the *Bonito* made her way out through the mouth of the harbour. The pirates, in their lighter boats, rowed round and round her, shooting clouds of arrows, but not venturing to come to close quarters after the fate which had befallen the four largest vessels of their fleet. As soon as they were clear of the islet the sails were hoisted. The wind had fallen much during the night, and had worked round to the east, and under sails and oars the *Bonito* left the island, none of the pirates venturing to follow in pursuit.

The oars were soon laid in, and the men, with mallets and chisels, set to work to caulk the seams through which the water was making its way. The casualties were now inquired into, and it was found that six men had been shot dead, and that nine-and-twenty had received wounds more or less severe from the arrows of the pirates. Francis had been twice wounded while superintending the placing of the bales. One arrow had gone through his right leg, another had struck him in the side and glanced cff a rib.

"This won't do, Messer Francisco," the captain said as he assisted Giuseppi to bandage the wounds. "Signor Polani placed you on board to learn something of seamanship and

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commerce, not to make yourself a target for the arrows of pirates. However, we have to thank you for the saving of the *Bonito*, for assuredly she would have been stove in had not the happy thought of hanging those bales overboard struck you. It would be of no use against war-galleys, whose beaks are often below the water-line, but against craft like these pirates it acts splendidly, and there is no doubt that you saved the ship from destruction and us from death, for after the burning of the two first vessels that attacked us you may be sure they would have shown but little mercy. I can't think how you came to think of it."

"Why, I have read in books, captain, of defenders of walls hanging over trusses of straw to break the blows of battering-rams and machines of the besiegers. Directly you said they were going to ram us it struck me we might do the same, and then I thought that bales of cloth similar to those you got up on deck to trade with the islanders would be just the thing."

"It was a close shave," the captain said. "I was leaning over, and saw the whole side of the ship bend beneath the blow, and expected to hear the ribs crack beneath me. Fortunately the *Bonito* was stronger built than her assailants, and their bows crumpled in before her side gave; but my heart was in my mouth for a time, I can tell you."

"So was mine, captain. I hardly felt these two arrows strike me; they must have been shot from one of the other boats. Then I could not help laughing to see the way in which the men at the oars tumbled backwards at the moment when their vessel struck us; it was as if an invisible giant had swept them all off their seats together."

The wind continued favourable until they arrived at Candia, where the captain reported to the commander of a Venetian war galley lying in the port the attack that had been made

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upon him, and the galley at once started for the scene of the action to destroy any pirates she might find there or among the neighbouring islands, or in the various inlets and bays of the mainland. Having delivered their letters and landed a portion of their cargo for the use of Polani's agents in the islands, the *Bonito* proceeded to Cyprus. For some weeks she cruised along the coast of Syria, trading in the various Turkish ports, for Venice, although she had shared in some of the crusades, was now, as she had often been before, on friendly terms with the Turks. Her interests all lay in that direction; she carried on a large trade with them; and in the days when she lay under the interdict of the pope, and all Europe stood aloof from her, she drew her stores of provisions from the Moslem ports, and was thus enabled successfully to resist the pressure which she suffered from the interdict.

She foresaw, too, the growing power of the Turks, and perceived that in the future they would triumph over the degenerate Greek empire at Constantinople. She had spent her blood and treasure freely in maintaining that empire; but the weakness and profligacy of its emperors, the intestine quarrels and disturbances which were for ever going on, and the ingratitude with which she had always treated Venice, had completely alienated the Venetians from her; Genoa had, indeed, for many years exercised a far more preponderating influence at Constantinople than Venice had done.

Having completed the tour of the Syrian ports the *Bonito* sailed north, with the intention of passing the Dardanelles and Bosphorus and proceeding to Azoph. When she reached the little island of Tenedos, a few miles from the entrance to the strait, she heard news which compelled the captain to alter his intentions. A revolution had broken out in Constantinople, aided by the Genoese of Pera. The cruel tyrant Calojohannes V. had been deposed, and his heir Andronicus, whom he had

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deprived of sight and thrown into a dungeon, released and placed on the throne. As a reward for the services she had rendered him, Andronicus issued a decree conferring Tenedos upon Genoa.

The news had just arrived when the *Bonito* entered the port, and the town was in a ferment. There were two or three Venetian war-ships in the harbour; but the Venetian admiral, being without orders from home as to what part to take in such an emergency, remained neutral. The matter was, however, an important one, for the possession of Tenedos gave its owners the command of the Dardanelles, and a fleet lying there could effectually block the passage.

The people thronged up to the governor's house with shouts of "Down with Genoa!" The governor being unsupported by any Greek or Genoese troops, bowed to the popular will, and declared that he did not recognize the revolution that had taken place in Constantinople, and refused to submit to the decree of Andronicus. Donato Trono, a Venetian merchant resident in the island, and other Venetians, harangued the people, and pointed out to them that alone they could not hope to resist the united forces of Greece and Genoa, and that their only hope of safety lay in placing themselves under the protection of Venice. The people, seeing the justice of the arguments of the Venetians, and preferring the Venetian rule to that of Genoa, agreed to the proposal. The banner of St. Mark was raised amid great enthusiasm, and the island declared subject to Venice.

A Genoese galley in port immediately set sail and quickly carried the news to Constantinople, where the emperor at once threw the whole of the Venetian residents into prison. As soon as the news of this reached Tenedos the captain of the *Bonito* held a consultation with Francis.

"It is evident, Messer Francisco, that we cannot proceed

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upon our northward voyage. We should be captured and held at Constantinople; and, even did we succeed in passing at night, we should fall into the hands of the Genoese—who are far stronger in the Black Sea than we are—for if Venice accepts the offer of the people of this place and takes possession of the island, Genoa is sure to declare war. I think, then, that we had better make our way back to Venice with what cargo we have on board, and there get fresh orders from the padrone. We have not done badly so far, and it is better to make sure of what we have got than to risk its loss, for at any day we may fall in with the Genoese fleet sailing hither."

Francis quite agreed with the captain's opinion, and the *Bonito* sailed for the south. They touched, on their way, at several islands, and the news that an early outbreak of hostilities between Genoa and Venice was probable—in which case there would be an almost complete cessation of trade—produced so strong a desire on the part of the islanders to lay in a store of goods, that the captain was able to dispose of the rest of his cargo on good terms, and to fill up his ship with the produce of the islands.

Thus the *Bonito* was deep in the water when she re-entered the port of Venice after an absence of about three months. As soon as the anchor was dropped the captain, accompanied by Francis, hired a gondola, and rowed into the city to give an account to Signor Polani of the success of his voyage, and to lay before him a list of the cargo with which the *Bonito* was laden. The merchant received them with great cordiality, and embraced Francis with the affection of a father.

"Do you go at once into the salon, Francisco; you will find my daughters expecting you there, for the news came an hour ago that the *Bonito* was entering port. Of course we heard from the letters from Candia of your adventures with the pirates, and the gallant way in which the *Bonito* defeated them. You

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will find, captain, that I have ordered an extra month's pay to be given to all on board.

"The captain did full justice, Francisco, in his account of the matter, to your quickness in suggesting a method by which the effort of the ramming of the enemy was neutralized, and for the courage you showed in carrying out your idea; but we will talk of that afterwards. He and I have business to transact which will occupy us for some time, so the sooner you go the better."

Francis at once took himself off and joined the girls, who received him with the heartiest greeting.

"We were glad indeed, Francis," Maria said, "when our father told us that the *Bonito* was signalled as entering the port. No letters have come for some time, and we feared that you must have entered the Dardanelles and reached Constantinople before the news arrived there of that affair at Tenedos, in which case you would no doubt have been seized and thrown into the dungeons."

"We were at Tenedos when the affair took place," Francis said, "and have had no opportunity since of sending a letter by any ship likely to be here before us. The outbreak made us alter our plans, for, of course, it would not have been safe to have sailed farther when the emperor was so enraged against Venice. I need hardly tell you I was not sorry when we turned our faces again towards Venice. I have enjoyed the voyage very much, and have had plenty to occupy me; still, three months at a time is long enough, and I was beginning to long for a sight of Venice."

"For a sight of Venice and—" Maria repeated, holding up her finger reprovingly.

"And of you both," Francis said smiling. "I did not think it necessary to put that in, because you must know that you are Venice to me."

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"That is much better," Maria said approvingly. "I think you have improved since you have been away. Do you not think so, Giulia?"

"I don't think that sort of nonsense is an improvement," Giulia said gravely. "Any of the young Venetian gallants can say that sort of thing. We do not want flattery from Francisco."

"You should say you do not want it, Giulia," Maria said laughing. "I like it, I own, even from Francisco. It may not mean anything, but it is pleasant nevertheless; besides, one likes to think that there is just a little truth in it, not much, perhaps, but just a little in what Francisco said, for instance. Of course we are not all Venice to him, still, just as we are pleased to see him, he is pleased to see us; and why shouldn't he say so in a pretty way? It's all very well for you to set up as being above flattery, Giulia, but you are young yet; I have no doubt you will like it when you get as old as I am."

Giulia shook her head decidedly.

"I always think," she said, "when I hear a man saying flattering things to a girl, that it is the least complimentary thing he can do, for it is treating her as if he considers that she is a fool, otherwise he would never say such outrageous nonsense to her."

"There, Francisco," Maria laughed, "you are fairly warned now; beware how you venture to pay any compliment to Giulia in future. It would be a dull world if every one were to think as you do, Giulia, and to say exactly as they meant. Fancy a young man saying to you: 'I think you are a nice sort of girl, no prettier than the rest, but good-tempered and pleasant, and to be desired because your father is rich!' A nice sort of way that would be to be made love to!"

"There is no occasion for them to say anything at all," Giulia said indignantly; "we don't go about saying to them,

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'I think you are good looking, and well-mannered, and witty;' or, 'I like you because they say you are a brave soldier and a good swordsman.' Why should they say such things to us? I suppose we can tell if anyone likes us without all that nonsense."

"Perhaps so," the elder girl assented; "and yet I maintain it's pleasant, and at any rate it's the custom, and as it's the custom, we must put up with it. What do you say, Francisco?"

"I don't know anything about it," Francis said; "certainly some of the compliments I have heard paid were barefaced falsehoods, and I have wondered how men could make them, and how women could even affect to believe in them; but, on the other hand, I suppose that when people are in love, they really do think the person they are in love with is prettier and more charming, or braver and more handsome, than anyone else in the world, and that though it may be flattery, it is really true in the opinion of the person who utters it."

"And now let us leave the matter alone for the present, Francisco; we are dying to hear all about your adventures, and especially that fight with the pirates. The captain in his letter merely said that you were attacked and beat the pirates off, and that you would have been sunk if it hadn't been that at your suggestion they lowered bales of cloth over to break the shock, and that so many men were killed and so many wounded, and that you were hit twice by arrows, but the wounds were healing. That's all he said, for papa read that portion of his letter out to us; now we want a full and particular account of the affair."

Francis gave a full account of the fight, and then related the other incidents of the voyage.

"We know many of the ports you touched at," Maria said when he had finished, "for when we were little girls papa

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took us sometimes for voyages in his ships when the times were peaceful and there was no danger. Now let us order a gondola, and go for a row; papa is sure to be occupied for ever so long with your captain."

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CHAPTER IX.

THE CAPTURE OF THE "LIDO."

SIGNOR POLANI told Francis that evening that he was much pleased with the report that the captain had given of his eagerness to acquire information both in mercantile and nautical matters, and of the manner in which he had kept the ship's books, and the entries of the sales, and purchases of goods.

"Many young fellows at your age, Francis, when there was no compulsion for them to have taken these matters into their charge, would have thought only of amusement and gaiety when they were in port, and I am glad to see that you have a real interest in them. Whatever the line in life a young man takes up, he will never excel in it unless he goes into it with all his heart, and I am very glad to see that you have thrown yourself so heartily into your new profession. The *Bonito* made a most satisfactory voyage, far more so than I anticipated when I found that she would not be able to carry out the programme I had laid down for her; but the rise in the prices in the latter part of your voyage have more than made up for the loss of the trade in the Black Sea; and you have done as much in the three months you were absent as I should have expected had you been, as I anticipated, six months away.

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"You will be some little time before you start again, as I wish to see how matters are going before I send the *Bonito* out upon another adventure. At present nothing is settled here; that there will be war with Genoa before long is certain, but we would rather postpone it as long as possible, and the senate has not yet arrived at the decision to accept the offer of Tenedos. Negotiations are going on with Genoa and Constantinople, but I have little hope that anything will come of them.

"It is getting late in the season now, and the war will hardly break out until next spring; but I have no doubt the struggle will then begin, and preparations are going on with all speed in the dockyards. We are endeavouring to obtain allies, but the combination is so strong against Venice that we are meeting with little success, and Ferrara is really the only friend on whom we can rely, and she is not in a position to aid us materially in such a struggle as this will be. I am glad to tell you that the affair in which you were concerned before you sailed has now completely dropped; nothing has been heard of Mocenigo since he made his escape.

"A decree of banishment was passed against him, but where he is we know not. That wretched woman was sentenced to four years' imprisonment, but upon my petition she will be released at the end of six months, on her promise that she will not again set foot in the territory of the republic. As Mocenigo has not been brought to trial, there will be no further official inquiry into the matter, and I have not been further questioned as to the source from which I obtained my information as to the girls' hiding-place. Your share in the matter is therefore altogether unsuspected, and I do not think that there is any further danger to you from Mocenigo's partisans."

"I should be glad enough to remain in Venice a fortnight

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or so, sir," Francis said, "but if at the end of that time you have any vessel going out, I shall prefer to go in her. Now that my studies are over, I shall very soon get tired of doing nothing. Perhaps in a few years I may care more for the gaieties of Venice, but certainly at present I have no interest in them, and would rather be at sea. Matteo tells me that you have promised he shall make a few voyages in your ships, and that you have told him he shall go in one of them shortly; if so, it would be very pleasant to us both if we can sail together."

"I will arrange it so, Francisco. It would be for the benefit of my cousin—who is a good lad, but hare-brained, and without ballast—for you to go with him. I should indeed have proposed it, but the vessel in which I have decided he shall sail will be ready for sea in another ten days or so, and I thought that you would prefer a longer stay in Venice before you again set sail. If, however, it is your wish to be off again so soon, I will arrange for you both to sail together. This time you will go officially as my supercargo, since you now understand the duties. The captain of the vessel in which you will sail is a good sailor and a brave man, but he has no aptitude for trade, and I must have sent a supercargo with him. Your decision to go relieves me of this, for which I am not sorry, for men who are at once good supercargos and honest men are difficult to get."

The fortnight passed rapidly, and Francis enjoyed his stay at the merchant's greatly, but he was not sorry when, at the end of ten days, Polani told him that the lading of the vessel would begin the next day, and that he had best go on board early and see the cargo shipped, so that he might check off the bales and casks as they were sent on board, and see where each description of goods was stowed away.

"I think, papa, it is too bad of you sending Francisco away

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so soon," Maria said, when at their evening meal she learned the news of his early departure.

"It is his own doing," her father said; "it is he who wants to go, not I who send him. I consider that it is entirely your fault."

"Our fault!" the two girls repeated in surprise.

"Certainly. If you had made Venice sufficiently pleasant to him he would not wish to leave. I am too busy to see about such things, and I left it to you to entertain him. As he is in such a hurry to get away again, it is evident that you have not succeeded in doing so."

"Indeed, Signor Polani, your daughters have been everything that is kind, but I have no taste for assemblies and entertainments. I feel out of place there amid all the gaily-dressed nobles and ladies, and no sooner do I get there than I begin to wonder how anyone can prefer the heated rooms and clatter of tongues, to the quiet pleasure of a walk backwards and forwards on the deck of a good ship; besides, I want to learn my profession, and there is so much to learn in it that I feel I have no time to lose."

"I am right glad to see your eagerness in that direction, Francisco, and I did but jest with my daughters. You have not yet asked me what is the destination of the *Lido*, for that is the name of your new vessel. This time you are going quite in a new direction. In the spring we are certain to have war with Genoa, and as Parma and Hungary will probably both take side against us, we may find ourselves cut off from the mainland, and, in case of a disaster happening to our fleet, in sore straits for food. I am, therefore, going to gather into my warehouses as much grain as they will hold; this will both be a benefit to the state, and will bring me good profit, for the price of wheat will be high in the city if we are leaguered on the land side.

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"The *Lido* will go down to Sicily, and fill up there with corn. You will have to use care before entering port, for with war now certain both parties will begin to snap up prizes when they get the chance. So you must keep a sharp look-out for Genoese galleys. If you find the coast is too closely watched, you will go to the Moorish ports. We are friends with them at present, though doubtless, as soon as Genoa and ourselves get to blows, they will be resuming their piratical work. Thus you will, this time, take in a much smaller amount of cargo, as you will have to pay for the most part in gold."

It mattered little to Francis where he voyaged; but Matteo, who had been greatly delighted at the thought of sailing with his friend, was much disappointed when he heard that they were only going to fetch grain from Sicily.

"Why, it is nothing to call a voyage," he said in tones of disgust, when Francis told him the destination of the *Lido*. "I had hoped we were going to make a long voyage, and touch at all sorts of places, just as you did last time."

"I do not see that it matters much, Matteo; and we shall learn navigation just as well from one course as another. The voyage will not be a long one, unless we meet with unfavourable winds; but there's no saying what may happen, and you may meet with adventure even on a voyage to Sicily and back."

The trip down to Sicily was quickly made. Francis had worked hard on his first voyage, and was now able to make daily calculations as to the run made, the course steered, and the position of the ship, and found that these tallied closely with those of the captain. Matteo and he shared a large and handsome cabin, and the time passed pleasantly as the vessel ran down the coast of Italy. Once out of the Adriatic a sharp look-out was kept, but the coast of Sicily was made without seeing any sails of a suspicious character. The lads were struck with

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surprise and admiration when, on coming on deck in the morning, they saw the great cone of Etna lying ahead of them.

Neither of them had ever seen a mountain of any size, and their interest in the scene was heightened by a slight wreath of smoke which curled up from the summit of the hill.

"It is well worth a voyage, if it were only to see that mountain," Francis said. "What an immense height it is, and how regular in its shape!"

"And yet," Matteo said, "those who have journeyed from Italy into France tell me that there are mountains there beside which Etna is as nothing. These mountains are a continuation of the range of hills which we can see from Venice. Their tops are always covered with snow, and cannot be ascended by man; whereas it is easy, they say, to reach the top of Etna."

"Yes, that looks easy enough," Francis agreed. "It seems such a regular slope, that one could almost ride up; but I dare say, when you are close you would find all sorts of difficult places."

"I should like to try," Matteo said. "What a grand view there would be from the top! Is the port we are going to try first, captain, anywhere near the foot of the mountain?"

"No, I am going round the southern part of the island. On this side the ground is less fertile, and we should have difficulty in obtaining a cargo. But even were we to put into a port on this side, you would not be able to climb Mount Etna.

"Sicily has been an unfortunate country. Its great natural wealth has rendered it an object of desire to all its neighbours. It was the battle-ground of the Romans and Carthaginians. Pisa, Genoa, and Naples have all contended for its possession; and the Moors frequently make descents upon its coasts. It has seldom enjoyed a peaceful and settled government. The consequence is that general lawlessness prevails in the districts remote from the towns; while in the forests that clothe the side of

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Mount Etna there are numerous hordes of bandits who set the authorities at defiance, levy blackmail throughout the surrounding villages, and carry off wealthy inhabitants, and put them to ransom. No one in his senses would think of ascending that mountain, unless he had something like an army with him."

"I should like to try it all the same," Matteo asserted. "If there are woods all over it, it is not likely one would happen to meet with any of these people. I should like, above all things, to get to the top of that hill."

"It would be harder work than you think, young sir," the captain said. "You have no idea from this distance what the height is, or what a long journey it is to ascend to the top. I have been told that it is a hundred and twenty miles round its foot."

"I don't think you would like it, Matteo, if you were to try it," Francis said laughing. "You know you are as lazy as you can be, and hate exerting yourself. I am sure that before you got a quarter the distance up that mountain you would have only one wish, and that would be to be at the bottom again."

"I don't know," Matteo said. "I hate exerting myself uselessly—wasting my strength, as you do, in rowing at an oar, or anything of that sort; but to do anything great, I would not mind exertion, and would go on until I dropped."

"That is all very well, Matteo; but to do anything great you have got to do small things first. You could never wield a sword for five minutes unless you had practised with it; and you will never succeed in accomplishing any feats requiring great strength and endurance, if you do not practise your muscles on every occasion. You used to grumble at the height when you came up to my room in the old house, and I suppose Etna is something like two hundred times as high."

"That does sound a serious undertaking," Matteo said

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laughing; "and I am afraid that I shall never see the view from the top of Etna. Certainly I shall not, if it will be necessary beforehand to be always exercising my muscles by running up the stairs of high houses."

The next day they were off Girgenti, the port at which they hoped to obtain a cargo. They steered in until they encountered a fishing-boat, and learned from those on board that there was no Genoese vessel in port, nor, as far as the men knew, any state galleys anywhere in the neighbourhood. Obtaining this news, they sailed boldly into the port and dropped anchor. Francis, who had received before starting a list of houses with whom Signor Polani was in the habit of doing business, at once rowed ashore, Matteo and Giuseppi accompanying him. His business arrangements were soon completed; the harvest had been a good one, and there was an abundance of corn to be had at a cheap rate.

In half an hour he arranged for as large a quantity as the *Lido* would carry. The work of loading soon commenced, and in four days the ship was full up to the hatches.

Francis went on shore to settle the various accounts, and was just making the last payment when Matteo ran into the office.

"Four Genoese galleys are entering the bay!"

Francis ran out, and saw four Genoese galleys rowing in.

"It is too late to escape. Even were we empty we could not get away; but laden as the *Lido* is, they could row three feet to her one."

"What shall we do, Francisco?"

Francis stood for half a minute thinking.

"You had better stay here, Matteo. I will row out to the ship and send most of the men on shore. If they seize the ship, they may not take those on board prisoners; but if they do, there is no reason why they should take us all."

"You had better come on shore too, Francisco, and leave

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the captain in charge. You can do no good by staying there; and Polani would be more concerned at your capture than he would at the loss of a dozen ships. If you could do any good, it would be different; but as it is, it would be foolish to risk capture."

"I will see," Francis said; "at any rate do you stop here."

Jumping into a boat, he rowed towards the *Lido*, which was lying but a cable's-length from the shore. As he neared her, he shouted to the men to lower the boats.

"Captain," he said, "I do not know whether there is any danger of being captured by the Genoese. But it is useless to run any unnecessary risk; therefore send all the crew but three or four men on shore. If the Genoese board us, we have our papers as peaceful traders buying wheat; but if, in spite of that, they capture us, we must take our chance."

"Surely you are not thinking of stopping, Messer Francisco. The padrone would be terribly vexed if you were taken. He specially ordered me, before we started, to see that no unnecessary risk was run, and to prevent you from thrusting yourself into danger. Therefore, as captain of the ship, I must insist that you go on shore."

"I think I ought to stay here," Francis said.

"I do not think so," the captain said firmly, "and I will not suffer it. I have to answer for your safety to the padrone; and if you do not go by yourself, I shall order the men to put you into one of the boats by force. I mean no disrespect; but I know my duty, and that is to prevent you from falling into the hands of the Genoese."

"I will not oblige you to use force, captain," Francis said smiling, "and will do as you wish me."

In five minutes the men were all—save four, whom the captain had selected—in the boat, and rowing towards shore. Matteo was awaiting them when they landed.

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"That is right, Francisco. I was half afraid you would stay on board. I know how obstinate you are whenever you take a thing into your head."

"The captain was more obstinate still, Matteo, and said that unless I came away he would send me on shore by force; but I don't like deserting the ship."

"That is nonsense, Francisco. If the Genoese take her, they take her, and your remaining on board could not do any good. What are you going to do now?"

"We will at once leave the place with the men, Matteo, and retire into the country behind. It is not likely the Genoese would land and seize us here, but they might do so, or the inhabitants, to please Genoa, might seize us and send us on board. At any rate we shall be safer in the country."

The men had, by the captain's orders, brought their arms ashore on leaving the ship. This was the suggestion of Francis, who said that were they unarmed the people might seize them and hand them over to the Genoese.

At the head of this party, which was about fifty strong, Francis marched up through the little town and out into the country. He had really but little fear either that the Genoese would arrest them on shore, or that the people would interfere with them, for they would not care to risk the anger of Venice by interfering in such a matter. He thought it probable, however, that if his men remained in the town, broils would arise between them and any of the Genoese sailors who might land.

As soon as the Genoese galleys came up to the head of the bay a boat was lowered and rowed to the *Lido*, at whose mast-head the Venetian flag was flying. An officer, followed by six men, climbed up on to the deck.

"Are you the captain of this ship?" the officer asked as the captain approached him.

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"I am," the captain said.

"What ship is it?"

"It is the *Lido*, the property of Messer Polani, a merchant of Venice, and laden with a cargo of wheat."

"Then you are my prisoner," the Genoese said. "I seize this vessel as lawful prize."

"There is peace between the republics," the captain said. "I protest against the seizure of this ship as an act of piracy."

"We have news that several of our ships have been seized by the Venetians," the officer said; "and we therefore capture this vessel in reprisal. Where are your crew?"

"There are only four on board," the captain said. "We have filled up our cargo and were going to sail to-morrow, and therefore the rest of the crew were allowed to go on shore; and I do not think it is likely that they will return now," for one of the Genoese sailors had hauled down the flag of Venice and had replaced it with that of Genoa.

The Genoese officer briefly examined the vessel.

"Whom have you here on board with you?" he asked, struck with the furniture and fittings of Francis' cabin.

"This is the cabin of Matteo Giustiniani, a young noble of Venice, who is making his first voyage in order to fit himself for entering the service of the state, and of Francisco Hammond, who stands high in the affections of my patron."

The Genoese uttered an angry exclamation. The name of Polani was well known in Genoa as one of the chief merchants of Venice and as belonging to a ducal house, while the family of Giustiniani was even more illustrious; and had these passengers fallen into his hands, a ransom might have been obtained greatly exceeding the value of the *Lido* and her cargo.

Leaving four of his men on board he went off to the galley of the officer commanding the fleet, and presently returned with a large boat full of sailors.

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"You and your men can go ashore," he said to the captain. "The admiral does not deem you worth the trouble of carrying to Genoa; but be quick, or you will have to swim to shore."

As the *Lido's* boats had all gone ashore the captain hailed a fishing-boat which was passing, and with the four sailors was rowed to shore, well content that he had escaped the dungeons of Genoa. He rightly imagined that he and his men were released solely on account of the paucity of their numbers. Had the whole crew been captured they would have been carried to Genoa; but the admiral did not care to bring in five prisoners only, and preferred taking the ship alone.

Francis with his party followed the line of the coast, ascending the hills which rose steeply from the edge of the sea at a short distance from the town. He had brought with him from the town a supply of food sufficient for four or five days, and encamped in a little wood near the edge of the cliff. From this they had a view of the port and could watch the doings of the Genoese galleys. Fires were lit and meat cooked over them; and just as the meal was prepared the captain and the four sailors joined them amid a hearty cheer from the crew.

"I have made my protest," the captain said as he took his seat by the side of Francis, "and the padrone can make a complaint before the council if he thinks fit to do so; but there is small chance that he will ever recover the *Lido* or the value of her cargo."

"I don't like losing the ship," Francis said. "Of course it is only a stroke of bad fortune, and we could neither fly nor defend ourselves. Still one hates arriving home with the story that one has lost the ship."

"Yes," the captain agreed. "Messer Polani is a just man, yet no one cares to employ men who are unlucky; and the worst of it is that the last ship I commanded was wrecked. Many men would not have employed me again, although it wasn't

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my fault. But after this second affair in a few months' time I shall get the name of being an unlucky man, and no one in his senses would employ a man who is always losing his ships."

"Do you think that there is any chance of our recapturing it, captain?"

"Not the least in the world," the captain replied. "Even supposing that we could get on board and overpower the Genoese without being heard, and get her out of the port without being seen, we should not get away. Laden as she is with grain, she will sail very slowly, and the Genoese would overtake her in a few hours; and I needn't tell you that then there would be very little mercy shown to any on board."

"That is true enough," Francis said. "Still I do not like the idea of losing the *Lido*."

After the meal was over Francis rose and asked Matteo to accompany him on a stroll along the cliffs, Giuseppi as usual following them. They walked along until they rounded the head of the bay and were able to look along the coast for some distance. It was steep and rocky and worn into a number of slight indentations. In one of these rose a ledge of rocks at a very short distance from the shore.

"How much further are we going, Francis?" Matteo said when they had walked a couple of miles.

"About a quarter of a mile, Matteo. I want to examine that ledge of rocks we saw from the first point."

"What on earth do you want to look at them for, Francis? You certainly are the most curious fellow I ever met. You scoffed at me when I said I should like to go up Mount Etna, and now here you are dragging me along this cliff just to look at some rocks of no possible interest to any one."

"That is the point to be inquired into, Matteo. I think it's possible they may prove very interesting."

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Matteo shrugged his shoulders, as he often did when he felt too lazy to combat the eccentric ideas of his English friend.

"There we are," Francis said at last, standing on the edge of the cliff and looking down. "Nothing could be better."

"I am glad you think so, Francisco," Matteo said, seating himself on the grass. "I hope you intend to stay some little time to admire them, for I own that I should like a rest before I go back."

Francis stood looking at the rocks. The bay was a shallow one and was but five or six hundred yards from point to point, the rocks rising nearly in a line between the points and showing for about two hundred yards above water, and at about the same distance from the cliffs behind them.

"What height do you think those rocks are above the water, Giuseppi?"

"It is difficult to judge, signor, we are so high above them; but I should think in the middle they must be ten or twelve feet."

"I should think it likely they were more than double that, Giuseppi; but we shall see better when we get down to the bottom. I daresay we shall find a place where we can clamber down somewhere."

"My dear Francisco," Matteo said earnestly, "is anything the matter with you? I begin to have doubts of your sanity. What on earth do these rocks matter to you one way or the other? or what can you care whether they are thirty inches or thirty feet above the water? They do not differ from other rocks, as far as I can see. They are very rugged and very rough, and would be very awkward if they lay out at sea instead of in this little bay, where they are in nobody's way. Is it not enough that you have tramped two miles to have a look at them, which means four miles, as we have got to return somehow? and now you talk about climbing down that break-neck cliff to have a look at them close!"

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But Francis paid no attention to Matteo's words. He was gazing down into the clear smooth water, which was so transparent that every stone and pebble at the bottom could be seen.

"The water looks extremely shallow, Giuseppi. What do you think?"

"It seems to me, signor, that there is not a foot of water between the rocks and the shore."

"It does look so, Giuseppi; but it is possible that the transparency of the water deceives us, and that there may be ten or twelve feet of water there. However, that is what we must go down and find out. Now the first thing is to look about and find some point at which we can get down the beach."

"Well, I will lie down and take a nap till you come back," Matteo said in a tone of resignation. "I have no interest either in these rocks or in the water; and as far as I can protest I do so against the whole proceeding, which to me savours of madness."

"Don't you understand, you silly fellow, what I am thinking about?" Francis said impatiently.

"Not in the smallest degree, Francisco; but do not trouble to tell me—it makes no matter. You have some idea in your head, carry it out by all means; only don't ask me to cut my hands, tear my clothes, and put myself into a perspiration by climbing down that cliff."

"My idea is this, Matteo. There is no chance of carrying off the *Lido* by speed from the Genoese; but if we could get her out of the bay we might bring her round here and lay her behind those rocks, and the Genoese would pass by without dreaming she was there. Half a mile out those rocks would look as if they form part of the cliff, and none would suspect there was a passage behind them."

"That is something like an idea!" Matteo said, jumping to his feet. "Why did you not tell me of it before? You have

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