

In Hands of the Mafia

People will tell you that the days of romance are gone, never to return again, but my strange experience in Venice, in the winter season of 1894, changed my opinion on the subject once and for all.

I had at that time a business commission in the larger towns of Italy and from Verona I was going on to Venice. In my compartment was a young Italian—a rather nasty looking fellow, clad in a curious green traveling cloak. We did not speak to one another, and as it was very cold, I carried myself up in my corner and went to sleep, wishing inwardly that I had had the forethought to bring a warm overcoat, with me like some warm companion.

When I awoke we were apparently near Venice, and I was the only occupant of the carriage. Where the Italian had got out I did not know, but he had left his key behind him. It was a new pair, warmly lined, and I slipped it over my shoulders, intending to hand it over to the officials at Venice. Ten minutes later the train steamed into the station, and I turned out to look after my luggage. There were a good many people in the train, and in my eagerness I quite forgot that I was wearing a cloak which did not belong to me, and which I ought to hand over forthwith to the lost property office.

Outside the station there were the usual crowds of persuasive gondoliers vying for hire, and the whole scene was one of bustle and confusion. It was now late at night, and the lights of the station, reflected in the inky black water, had a weirdly picturesque effect. Presently a gondolier came toward me, gave me a searching glance which took me in from head to foot, and then inquired, in a curtly bow, if he might have the honor of taking the signor to his hotel. I signified my assent, and in a few moments my belongings and myself were more or less snugly stowed away. With a few strokes my gondolier drew clear of the crowded station, and we were presently sliding down the broad bosom of the Grand Canal.

The night was cold, and there was a kind of damp frostiness in the biting wind which sighed across the lagoon. Instinctively I drew my cloak closely around me, and then realized with a jerk that I had quite forgotten to deliver it to the railway officials. "How forgetful of me," I thought. "But, never mind! I will get a messenger from the hotel with it tomorrow morning."

The ancient palazzo, now turned into a plebeian hotel, at which I had my rooms, was situated on a slight rise some little distance from the Grand Canal, and we were presently threading a maze of narrow waterways, lit only by twinkling lamps which threw straggling lines of light across the inky water. Everything was absolutely quiet, for Venice is indeed a silent city when the night falls on the scene. Occasional lights, but very rarely, a gondola would cross our path, and every now and then there came the monotonous chant of my gondolier, as we neared a point where the canal branched off. "Sa sta!" he would chant, "sa premi!" as we dived into some devious waterway to the left; while if we were creeping straight on, "lugo eh!" he called across the water from his boat.

It seemed to me that we were taking rather a long time to reach the hotel, but as I had not been in Venice before, I did not like to say anything. Presently, however, the gondolier ran alongside a sort of decayed quay, above which towered a shabby shuttered house, evidently of considerable antiquity.

"Surely this is not the Hotel," I cried, in surprise; "it looks like a dungeon."

The gondolier bowed low. "It is, signor," he said; "the hotel is on the passage on the left, and I will do myself the pleasure of conducting your excellency thither."

He stepped off the gondola, tossed a loop of rope over a stone projection, and led me toward a narrow passage, which I had not noticed. At the far end of this alley I saw a twinkling oil lamp, which my guide assured me was the light of the Hotel.

Inwardly I cursed the miserably Italian merchant at Verona who had recommended me to such a miserable place.

Suddenly, without the slightest warning, I felt something slipped over my head. I heard a few muttered commands, and then I felt myself being carried by strong arms.

I could not see. I could hardly breathe, but I realized at once that I was the victim of an outrage. And the memory of all the crimes which were committed in this vast network of waterways and ancient

houses surged into my brain until I felt sick with terror.

Presently I was laid down, none too gently, on a bench. Then came the shutting of a door, and silence. I tried to rise to my feet, but during the brief period I had been carried along my captors had contrived to bind me, so that I now found it impossible to move. My thoughts at this time were none too pleasant. I realized that if I never left my prison alive no one would be very much the wiser, and the reflection did not make me feel any more comfortable.

I was not left to myself for long. Presently I heard footsteps close to me, the cover over my head was torn off, my footstraps removed, and I was led from the room by a weird-looking figure in a mask and hood. He bore an uncomfortable resemblance to a member of the Spanish Inquisition.

We entered into a brilliantly lighted room, filled with yawning with men, all clad in the same somber garb of mask and hood. As my gaoler drew me in a kind of muffled roar went up from the assembly and those nearest to me shook their fists in my face. Suddenly a tall man at the far end of the room moved toward me, the others making way for him respectfully.

For a moment he gazed earnestly into my face. Then he turned angrily to my gaoler. "What, in the name of heaven, does this mean?" he hissed. "You have brought the wrong man!" Instantly consternation reigned in the room, and everybody crowded round to examine me, while the gaoler tried to explain things. Up to this moment I had been more or less in a dream—the rapidly with which events succeeded one another had confused me—but now I found my tongue.

"I do not know what is the meaning of the outrage to which I have been subjected," I said, "but if you have any doubts as to my identity I may tell you, at once that I am an Englishman, Charles Raymond by name, and I have come from Verona today. I have papers in my pockets to prove it."

The leader heard me out, then he beckoned to me to follow him. Mechanically I obeyed, and he led me into a small ante-room. Then he turned to me. "Sir," he said, in most excellent English, "we owe you a profound apology, and also an explanation. But, first of all, will you tell us how it is that you are wearing that green cloak?"

In a few words I explained how I came to be possessed of the coat.

The eyes behind the mask smiled. "Yes," he said, "I see now how the whole thing has happened. We were on the lookout for a member of our society—a member who has violated his commands. He was known only to the members of our inner circle, but our humble instruments were told to look out for a man in a green cloak and to bring him hither. I much regret that you should have been the victim of so unfortunate a mistake. It is a pity, too, that the traitor has temporarily escaped us; he must have received a warning. At what point did you say he left the train?"

I told him as nearly as possible, and he nodded gravely. "It is of little moment," he said, "the scoundrel will not get far."

"And now," continued my mysterious interlocutor, "I can see you are eaten up with curiosity as to who and what we are. Is it not so? I thought so! But, unfortunately, I am not at liberty to tell you anything. I want you now to give me your solemn promise, on your honor as an Englishman, to say nothing to any person in Venice of your adventure of tonight. I know your English; and I know that if you pass your word you will keep it. Having given me this promise, you shall be conveyed to your hotel without delay, and we shall be happy to recompense you for the inconvenience we have caused you."

The politeness of the man—he was evidently a gentleman to his fingertips—fascinated me, and I gave my parole quite willingly. Forthwith, with a few words of apology, he placed the covering over my head again and led me out through the main room to the ancient quay on which I had first landed, and so into the gondola.

"Farewell, Signor Raymond," he said; "I rely on you." Then, in a whisper: "It is not every one who enters the judgment hall of the Mafia and leaves it alive!"

Ten minutes later my gondolier removed the cloak from my head and took the strap off my wrists. Three minutes afterward he dumped me and my baggage down on the broad steps of the hotel, and, with a couple of sweeping strokes, vanished into the night. The landlord of the hotel was in a mild state of wonderment as to where I had been, but, mindful of my

promise, I told him nothing, and tumbled off to bed as soon as possible. As I was undressing an envelope fell out of my side pocket, and, on picking it up, I found enclosed Italian bank notes to the value of 250 lire—roughly £10. There was nothing else in the envelope, and I could only surmise that the money had been slipped into my pocket by way of compensation for my weird adventure.

One thing more. Two days later I was chatting with a merchant in his office close to the Rialto when my eye caught a paragraph in an Italian paper on his desk. It was very brief. It simply recounted how a man, unknown, who had been arrested for vagrancy, had been found stabbed to the heart in the jail at Verona. The dagger with which he had been killed bore an inscription which showed beyond a doubt that the deed was the work of the dreaded Mafia.

The merchant saw the paragraph and shuddered. "Fancy being killed even in a prison cell," he said. "No one can escape the Mafia!"

And I shuddered with him. — The Traveler.

Identification Failed

The postmaster at Clayton at the time I write of and for two years previously was a single man, thirty-five years old, named Henry Day. He made his home with a widow named Martin, who had three children. As postmaster he was known to every man, woman and child for five miles around, and you would say that his identity could be proved by any other man's. One morning Day was missing, and within an hour the widow started the community by charging him with attempted assault and robbery. Her statement was to the effect that she had been awakened about midnight and found him in her room. She had that day received \$2,000 in cash, and he demanded the money. When she cried out, he struck her with a club, and during the few minutes she was unconscious he secured the money and fled.

There are some doubts as to whether this was the slightest reason to suspect she could be mistaken? She had seen him and heard his voice. So also had Frank and Hattie as he left the house. He had taken a freight train which passed the station at 1 o'clock a. m., and the station agent had even spoken to him. As he was the only passenger, the conductor and two brakemen could fully identify him. Was there over a plainer case?

It was three weeks before Mr. Day was overhauled—and brought back for trial. He was not even frustrated. He calmly denied that he was Henry Day. He denied that he had ever been in Clayton. Indeed he was so cool and nifty that the officers, who knew him as well as they knew their own children, began to doubt if he were really the man before they started back.

The prisoner, declared the officers mistaken, but made no objection to returning with them. There were 500 people at the depot to see him. Every one recognized him as Henry Day. Next day he was arraigned before a justice of the peace under that name. He denied it and gave his name as James Bailey. His plea was "not guilty," and he had the best lawyers in the county. The doubt which the officers brought back with them now began to bear fruit. When Mrs. Martin took the stand, she

positively identified the prisoner as Day. On cross examination she began to waver. One of her children swore positively; another "thought so." A clerk in the postoffice was put on the stand to identify the prisoner. He was positive at first, but ended by doubting. Only two young persons out of thirty called to the stand were positive. The defense claimed a case of mistaken identity. The prisoner declared his name to be James Bailey and that he was born of American parents in Switzerland. He had come to the United States as a tourist and had only been in the country two weeks when arrested. He had about \$1,000 in money, some of which was English gold.

When the trial in the high court came on, the crew of the freight train and the station agent were put on the stand. Each set out to be positive, but each ended by doubting. The testimony of the station agent was a fair sample.

"Mr. Jones, you were acquainted with Henry Day?"

"Yes, sir."

"What sort of nose had he?"

"None? Why, a straight nose, sir."

"Surg of this?"

"Yes, sir."

"That will do."

The prisoner in the box had a Roman nose. Did Day have that sort of nose? One half the village said yes, the other half no. The widow Martin was determined to be positive this time. She not only believed in what she was going to swear to, but a hundred different people had encouraged her in her conviction. This was the way she came to grief.

"You think it was about midnight when you awoke?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, what did you see?"

"I saw the prisoner at the foot of the bed and called out."

"Did you know who it was before you heard his voice?"

"No, sir."

"Well, what did he say?"

"He said, 'I want that money or I'll murder you.'"

"You were greatly frightened?"

"Yes, sir."

"And yet, frightened as you were, you recognized his voice?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, let us see if there is any similarity. Prisoner, you will call out the words used by the man in the bedroom."

The prisoner complied, seeming to put himself in the other's place, and his words knocked the bottom out of the prosecution. The Widow Martin seemed stupefied as she looked at him.

"So you swear that this is the voice you heard in your bedroom, do you?" asked the lawyer.

"I can't say."

Of the two men who had been positive at the preliminary examination one backed square down, while the other was full of doubts. When the case was closed and the jury went out, eight were doubtful and the other four not very positive, and the result was a verdict of "not guilty." Bailey remained in town for a couple of weeks, meeting everybody as a stranger and wandering around to see the sights, and then went quietly away, "to be seen no more. Was he Bailey or Day? I have told you how they failed to prove he was anybody but Bailey, and yet he was Day. Years afterward I interviewed him in a South Carolina jail for two days before he was to be tried for

\$50 Reward.

Stolen Sunday, June 8th, one milk-annote dog, very dark grey, white breast, light chops, light grey stripe running from point of nose up between eyes, front legs white, hind feet white, extreme tip of tail white, belly light color, always carries tail curled over back or left side, nose very small like a fox or coon. I will pay the above reward for any information that will lead to the arrest and conviction of the thief and recovery of dog.

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