

VENETIAN GLASS.

— BY —

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I.

IN THE OLD WORLD.

They had been to the Lido for a short swim in the slight but bracing surf of the Adriatic. They had had a midday breakfast in a queer little restaurant, known only to the initiated, and therefore early discovered by Larry, who had a keen scent for a cook learned in the law. They had loitered along the Riva degli Schiavoni, looking at a perambulatory puppet-show, before which a delightful audience sturdily disregarded the sharp wind which bravely fluttered the picturesque tatters of the spectators; and they were moved to congratulate the Venetians on their freedom from monotonous repertory of the Anglo-American Punch and Judy, which consists solely of a play really unique in the exact sense of that much-abused word. They were getting their fill of the delicious Italian art which is best described by an American verb—to loaf. And yet they were not wont to be idle, and they had both the sharp, quick American manner, on which laziness sits uneasily and frequently.

John Manning and Lawrence Laughton were both young New Yorkers. Larry—for so in youth was he called by everybody pending the arrival of years which should make him a universal uncle, to be known of all men as "Uncle Larry"—was as pleasant a travelling company as one could wish. He was the only son and heir of a father, now no more, but vaguely understood when alive and in the flesh to have been "in the China trade;" although whether this meant crockery or Cathay no one was able with precision to declare. Larry Laughton had been graduated from Columbia College with the class of 1860, and the following spring found him here in Venice after six months' ramble through Europe with his old friend, John Manning, partly on foot and partly in an old carriage of their own, in which they enjoyed the fast-vanishing pleasures of posting.

John Manning was a little older than Larry; he had left West Point in 1854 with a commission as second lieutenant in the Old Dragoons. For nearly six years he did his duty in that state of life in which it pleased the Secretary of War and General Scott to call him; he had crossed the plains one bleak winter to a post in the Rocky Mountains, and he had danced through two summers at Fort Adams and Newport; he had been stationed for a while in New Mexico, where there was an abundance of the pleasant sport of Indian fighting—even now he had only to make believe a little to see the tufted head of a Navajo peer around the columns supporting the Lion of Saint Mark, or to mistake the fringe of *facchini* on the edge of the Grand Canal for a group of the shiftless half breeds of New Mexico. In time the Old Dragoons had been ordered North, where the work was then less pleasant than on the border; and, in fact, it was a distinct unwillingness to execute the Fugitive Slave Law which forced John Manning to resign his commission in the army, although it was the hanging of John Brown which drew from him the actual letter of resignation. Before settling down to other work—for he was a man who could not and would not be idle—he had gratified his long desire of taking a turn through the Old World. Larry Laughton had joined him in Holland, where he had been making researches into the family history, and proving, to his own satisfaction at least, that the New York Mannings, in spite of their English name,

had come from Amsterdam to New Amsterdam. And now toward the end of April 1861, John Manning and Laurence Laughton stood on the Rialto, hesitating *Fra Marco e Todaro*, as the Venetians have it, in uninterested question whether they should go into the Ghetto, among the hideous of the chosen people, or out again to Murano for a second visit to the famous factory of Venetian glass.

"I say, John," remarked Larry as they lazily debated the question, gazing meanwhile on the steady succession of gondolas coming and going to and from the steps by the side of the bridge, "I'd as lief, if not liefer, go to Murano again, if they've any of their patent anti-poison goblets left. You know they say they used to make a glass so fine that it was shattered into shivers whenever poison might be poured into it. Of course I don't believe it, but a glass like that would be mighty handy in the sample-rooms of New York. I'm afraid a man walking up Broadway could use up a gross of the anti-poison goblets before he got one straight drink of the genuine article, unadulterated and drawn from the wood."

"You must not make fun of a poetic legend, Larry. You have to believe everything over here, or you do not get the worth of your money," said John Manning.

"Well, I don't know," was Larry's reply; "I don't know just what to believe. I was talking about it last night at Florian's while you were writing letters home."

"I did not know that Mr. Laughton had friends in Venice."

"Oh, I can make friends anywhere. And this one was lots of fun. He was a priest, an abbate, I think he calls himself. He had read five newspapers in the cafe, and paid for one tiny cup of coffee. When I furnished the Debats I passed it to him for his sixth—and he spoke to me in French, and I wasn't going to let an Italian talk French to me without answering back, so I just sailed in and began to swap stories with him."

"No doubt you gave him much valuable information."

"Well, I did; I just exuded information. Why the first thing he said, when I told him I was an American, was to wonder whether I hadn't met his brother, who was also in America—in Rio Janeiro—just as if Rio was the other side of North River."

John Manning smiled at Larry's disgusted expression, and asked, "What has this abbate to do with the fragile Venetian glass?"

"Only this," answered Larry. "I told him two or three North-westerns, just as well as I could in French, and then he said that marvellous things were also done here once upon a time. And he told me about the glass which broke when poison was poured into it."

"It is a pleasant superstition," said John Manning. "I think Poe makes use of it, and I believe Shakespeare refers to it."

"But did either Poe or Shakespeare say anything about the two goblets just alike, made for the twin brothers Manin nearly four hundred years ago? Did they tell you how one glass was shattered by poison and its owner killed, and how the other brother had to flee for his life? Did they inform you that the unbroken goblet exists to this day, and is in fact now for sale by a Hebrew Jew who peddles antiquities? Did they tell you that?"

"Neither Edgar Allan Poe nor William Shakespeare ever disturbs my slumbers by telling me anything of the sort," laughed Manning.

"Well, my abbate told me just that, and he gave me the address of the Shylock who has the surviving goblet for sale."

"Suppose we go there and see it," suggested Manning, "and you can tell me the whole story of the twin brothers as we go along."

"Shall we take a gondola or walk?" was Larry's interrogative acceptance of the suggestion.

"It's in the Ghetto, isn't it?"

"Most of the Jew curiosity dealers have left the Ghetto. Our Shylock has a palace on the Grand Canal. I guess we had better take a gondola, though it can't be far."

So they sat themselves down in one of the aquatic cabs which ply the water streets of the city in the sea. The gondolier stood to his oar and put his best foot foremost and as the boat sped forward on its way along the great S of the Grand Canal, Larry told the tale of the twin brothers and shattered goblet.

"Well, it seems that some time in the sixteenth century, say three hundred years ago or thereabout, there were several branches of the great and powerful Manin family—the same family to which the patriotic Daniele Manin belonged, you know. And at the head of one of those branches were the twin brothers Marco Manin and Giovanni Manin. Now these brothers were devoted to each other, and they had only one thought, one word, one deed. When one of them happened to think of a thing, it often happened that the other brother did it. So it was not surprising that they both fell in love with the same woman. She was a dangerous-looking, yellow-haired woman, with steel grey eyes—that is, if her eyes were not really green, as to which there was doubt. But there was no doubt at all that she was powerfully handsome. The abbate said that there was a famous portrait of her in one of these churches as a Saint Mary Magdalen, with her hair down. She was a splendid creature, and lots of men were running after her besides the twin Manins. The two brothers did not quarrel with each other about the woman, but they did quarrel with some of her lovers, and particularly with a nobleman of the highest rank and power, who was supposed to belong not only to the Council of Ten, but to the Three. Between this man and the Manins there was war to the knife and the knife to the hilt. One day Marco Manin expressed a wish for one of these goblets of Venetian glass so fine that poison shatters it, and so Giovanni went out to Murano and ordered two of them, of the very finest quality, and just alike in every particular of colour and shape and size. You see the twins always had everything in pairs. But the people at Murano somehow misunderstood the order, and although they made both glasses they sent home only one. Marco Manin was at table when it arrived, and he took it in his hand at once, and after admiring its exquisite workmanship—you see, all these old Venetians had the art feeling strongly developed—he told a servant to fill it to the brim with Cyprus wine. But as he raised the flowing cup to his lips it shattered in his grasp and the wine was spilt on the marble floor. He drew his sword and slew the servant who had sought to betray him, and rushing into the street he found himself face to face with the enemy whom he knew to have instigated the attempt. They crossed swords at once, but, before Marco Manin could have a fair fight for his life, he was stabbed in the back by a glass stiletto, the hilt of which was broken off short in the wound."

"Where was his brother all this time?" was the first question with which John Manning broke the thread of his friend's story.

"He had been to see the yellow-haired beauty, and he came back just in time to meet his brother's lifeless body as it was carried into their desolate home. Holding his dead brother's hand, as he had often held it living, he promised his brother to avenge his death without delay and at any cost. Then he prepared at once for flight. He knew that Venice would be too hot to hold him when the deed was

done: and, besides, he felt that without his brother life in Venice would be intolerable. So he made ready for flight. Twenty-hours to a minute after Marco Manin's death the body of the hireling assassin was sinking to the bottom of the Grand Canal, while the man who had paid for the murder lay dead on the same spot with the point of a glass stiletto in his heart! And when they wanted to send him the other goblet, there was no one to send it to: Giovanni Manin had disappeared."

"Where had he gone?" queried John Manning.

"That's what I asked the abbate, and he said he didn't know for sure, but that in those days Venice had a sizable trade with the Low Countries, and there was a tradition that Giovanni Manin had gone to the Netherlands."

"To Holland?" asked John Manning, with unwonted interest.

"Yes, to Amsterdam, or to Rotterdam, or to some of those dam towns, as we used to call them in our geography class."

"It was to Amsterdam," said Manning, speaking as one who had certain information.

"How do you know that?" asked Larry. "Even the abbate said it was only a tradition that he had gone to Holland at all."

"He went to Amsterdam," said Manning; "that I know."

Before Larry could ask how it was that his friend knew anything about the place of exile of a man he had never heard of ten minutes earlier, the gondola had paused before the door of the palace in which dwelt the dealer in antiquities who had in his possession the famous goblet of Venetian glass. As they ascended to the sequence of rambling rooms clustered with old furniture, rusty armour, and odds and ends of statuary, in which the modern Jew of Venice sat at the receipt of custom, both Larry Laughton and John Manning had to give their undivided attention to the framing in Italian of their wishes. Shylock himself was a venerable and benevolent person, with a look of wonderful shrewdness and an incomprehensibility of speech, for he spoke the Venetian dialect with a harsh Jewish accent, either of which would have daunted a linguistic veteran. Plainly enough, conversation was impossible, for he could barely understand their American-Italian, and they could not at all understand his Jewish-Venetian. But it would not do to let these Inglesi go away without paying tribute.

"Cio!" said Shylock, smiling graciously at his futile attempts to open communication with the enemy. Then he called Jessica from the deep window where she had been at work on the quaint old account-books of the shop, as great curiosities as anything in it, since they were kept in Venetian, but by means of the Hebrew alphabet. She spoke Italian, and to her the young men made known their wants. She said a few words to her father, and he brought forth the goblet.

It was a marvellous specimen of the most exquisite Venetian workmanship. A pair of green serpents, with eyes that glowed like fire, writhed around the golden stem of a blood red bowl, and as the white light of the cloudless sky fell on it from the broad window, it burned in the glory of the sunshine and seemed to fill itself full of some mysterious and royal wine. Shylock revolved it slowly in his hand to show the strange waviness of its texture, and as it turned, the serpents clung more closely to the stem and arched their heads and shot a glance of hate at the strangers who came to gaze on them with curious fascination.

John Manning looked at the goblet long and eagerly. "How did it come into your possession?" he asked.

And Jessica translated Shylock's declaration that the goblet had been at