

A VENETIAN ADVENTURE OF YESTERDAY

I WAS induced last summer to do rather a foolish thing for a middle-aged spinster—I undertook to chaperon a volatile young niece upon a continental tour. We travelled the usual course up the Rhine into Switzerland, which we enjoyed rapturously. Then passing the Alps, we spent a few days at Milan, and next proceeded to Verona. In all this journey, nothing occurred to mar our English frankness, or disturb our good humour; We beheld, indeed, the subjection of the Lombardese people with pain. Still, it was no business of ours; and I may as well candidly state that to the best of my recollection, we gave exceedingly little thought to the subject.

At Verona, the romance of Claudia's character found some scope. She raved at the so-called tomb of Juliet, was never tired of rambling among the ruins of the Roman amphitheatre, and made herself ill with the fresh figs and grapes presented in such abundance in the picturesque old marketplace. I confess I should as soon have dreamed of danger from some ancient volcano of the Alps, as from the political system of the country which we were traversing. Indeed, it never could have occurred to us that a quiet lady of a certain age, and a young one just emancipated from frocks, were persons about whom a great empire could have been in any alarm. It was destined that we should find ourselves of much more consequence than we gave ourselves credit for.

On returning from our ramble, and entering the great *sala* of the *Due Torre*, I remember experiencing a slight sense of alarm at sight of the large proportion of Austrian officers amongst those sitting down to dinner. Still, as the feeling sprung from no definite cause, I readily gave up my wish for a separate dinner; and, yielding to the solicitations of an officious waiter, allowed myself and niece to take seats at table. My first feeling returned in some force when I saw a tall, bearded officer, after depositing his sword in a corner of the room, seat himself next to Claudia. A request on her part for the salt, sufficed to open a conversation between them; but as it was in German, I could not follow its meaning. I observed, however, that by and by it waxed more warm than is customary in the languid hour of a *table d'hôte*; and, what was more, a silence ensued among a considerable number of those within hearing, as if the subject of their conversation were of an interesting character. A kind-looking English gentleman, on the opposite side of the table, seemed to become uneasy, and he soon telegraphed to me with a look which I could not misunderstand. In real alarm, I touched Claudia's arm, and indicated my wish to retire. As soon as we reached our own apartment, I anxiously asked her what she had been saying, and what that animated conversation was about. "Oh, nothing particular, Tantie, dear. We were talking politics; but I am not a Republican, you know. You need not look afraid. I am a Royalist, and I told him so. Only, I said I thought it would be better for Italy to have an Italian king than an Austrian emperor. He did not seem to think so; but you know every one cannot think alike."

"Oh, you unfortunate little girl!" I exclaimed,

"you little know the imprudence of which you have been guilty;" and I bitterly regretted my ignorance of German, which had allowed her to make such a demonstration of her sentiments. Still, she was but a child—what she had said was but a foolish sentiment. I could scarcely, after all, think that any serious consequences would ensue from so simple a matter; nevertheless I felt that the sooner we left Verona the better. We accordingly started for Venice next morning.

It was a most lovely day. The sun shone richly on the thousands of grape-bunches that hung on the vines, and on the wild-flowers that grew at their feet; and then the beautiful languid way in which the vines grow added another charm to the scene: apparently overcome by heat and lassitude, they throw themselves from one tree to another for their support, and hang between them in graceful festoons. We were not long, however in the region of the green, and now slightly autumn-tinted leaves; our steam-engine seemed suddenly to have conceived the idea of drowning us, for we darted into the sea, and with nothing but water on either side, we appeared to be hurried on by some gigantic rope-dancer, so light was the bridge over which we were carried. Involuntarily, I seized hold of Claudia's arm; but gradually I saw in the distance so beautiful a thing—such a silent, white, fairy-like city, under such a brilliant sky, that I lost all earthly fear, and, in spite of the tangible railway carriage in which I was, I felt as if, like King Arthur, I was being borne by fairies to their fairy home.

At last we arrived, and entered by a long dusty passage the dogana, in order to be examined. All romantic visions had now faded away: ordinary mortals were in attendance to look over our boxes; and it being the middle of a hot day, I began to feel both thirsty and tired, and most anxious to arrive quickly at the hotel, in order to secure comfortable apartments. Claudia stood for some time with the keys in her hand, vainly endeavouring to induce one of the custom-house officers to look at our boxes. The examination did not appear very strict, and we observed many of our fellow-passengers had their boxes just opened, and then were allowed to depart, with scarcely any delay. At last, one of the men approached us, and Claudia pointed to her open box, and asked him to examine it. The man looked up into her face—I thought, in a very scrutinising manner—then at the name on the box, and then retired, and whispered to one of his companions, who came back with him, and asked in Italian for our passport. This I immediately produced. They examined it, and said something to each other in German; upon which Claudia, who was more familiar with that language than with Italian, asked them in it to be kind enough to examine our boxes quickly, as her aunt was much tired. I saw the men exchange glances, and then they came forward to examine us. Being utterly unconscious of any necessity for concealment, we had left several English books at the very top of the box. These they carefully took out and laid on one side, and then proceeded to rummage the boxes from top to bottom. By this time, as most of our fellow-passengers had been examined, and had proceeded to their hotels, I was getting fatigued and nervous, when it struck me that a small *douceur* would