

THE BLACK GONDOLA.

SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTER I.

In the year 1334, when Venice was ruled by the Council of Ten, Count Leonardo Montecali and Stephen Dandolo were rival suitors for the hand of Francesca Avarenza, an orphan heiress of great wealth and wondrous beauty. Count Montecali who was a handsome young man of generous disposition, was successful, and he was just about to be married to the lovely girl whose heart he had won, when Stephen Dandolo, through the influence of his father with the Government, had him seized and thrown into a dungeon on a pretended charge of treachery in the Cyprus war. Count Montecali had been a prisoner for a year, when one day it occurred to him that by taking advantage of the superstitious nature of his jailer, Mario, he might contrive to escape. He pretended that he had taken lessons in magic from Maestro Cartini, and made the jailer believe that he had power to leave the dungeon at pleasure. The foolish Mario begged him not to make use of his powers as the jailer would be punished for allowing him to escape. While they were talking a powder magazine in the neighborhood caught fire, and the explosion which ensued was so terrible that it was felt even in the dungeon where the Count Leonardo Montecali was confined. The jailer hearing the noise and feeling the shock, attributed it to the magic of his prisoner, and fell senseless with fright. Count Leonardo, taking advantage of the situation, secured the jailer's keys, escaped from the prison, and in a black gondola, which was commonly used for carrying prisoners, made his way toward the Avarenza palace.

SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTER II.

When the Count reached the Avarenza Palace he saw Francesca and her attendant Agatha standing on a balcony watching the flames of the burning powder magazine. The servants and boatmen were so occupied in gazing at the fire that they did not notice him as he stepped from the gondola and made his way through the palace to the room which adjoined the balcony. As he approached the two women he heard them talking. Francesca evidently believed him dead. She spoke to her nurse of her undying love for her murdered lover, and said she would ever remain faithful to his memory. Indeed she said he was ever present beside her in spirit. When the count revealed himself she at first fell senseless in his arms, but soon revived and responded warmly to his professions of love, but while they were expressing their mutual love and gratitude at his escape, the nurse, who had watched them in amazement, came forward and asked her mistress if she was mad. Then Francesca remembered, and wildly urged her lover to leave the house at once. When he demanded an explanation she told him that after he was carried off to prison she was assured that he was dead, and Stephen Dandolo renewed his suit, being supported by his father, who had become Doge, and used all his influence with the Government. She was in despair and went for advice to the venerable Prince di Papoli, the friend of her father. The prince said the only way to save her from marriage with Stephen Dandolo was to marry her himself, and she consented. Count Leonardo declared that her marriage to an old man with one foot in the grave was but a mockery, and urged her to fly with him to France where she could secure a divorce and marry him. This she refused to do. She said she would not disgrace the name of her noble husband, and they must not see each other during the lifetime of the prince, but as he was a man of eighty years their parting might not be forever. The count at last admitted that she was right, and bid her farewell. She held out her forehead for him to kiss, but he caught her in his arms and passionately kissed her lips. At this moment the Prince di Papoli discovered them, and sternly asked Count Leonardo how he had escaped from prison. "You knew then that I was a prisoner?" said the count. The prince admitted that he did, and when Francesca asked him why he had allowed her to believe her lover dead, he said that as one of the rulers of Venice he had no right to reveal state secrets. He then told the count that the gondola which brought him to the palace awaited below to restore him to prison.

CHAPTER III.

Francesca clasped her hands together in despair. She almost regretted her refusal to fly.

"On what charge were you arrested?" said the prince to the count.

"I knew not."

"You knew not?"

"I repeat that I am wholly ignorant of the circumstances which led to my arrest," said Leonardo.

"You have no suspicion that some act of yours may have justified your imprisonment?"

"I have no suspicion, for I know that the jealousy of Stephen Dandolo was the sole cause."

"Young man, I am willing and anxious to believe you; but there are strong facts against you. Come, look into your inmost heart. Recollect that little is hidden from the vigilance of St. Mark. Question your own conscience, count, and see if no act of yours, which you think buried in the recesses of your brain, could explain the conduct of the government towards you."

"I never did act or deed which could by any possibility have offended the government!" said the young man in a tone of solemn earnestness scarcely to be mistaken.

"Count, I will candidly say that I believe you. I hope the Council of Three may be as confiding."

"Thank you, prince," said Leonardo coldly. He put no faith on the belief or good wishes of the prince.

"Young man, I believed you guilty," replied Di Papoli gravely; "and I listened to the prayer of the child of my best friend."

"Guilty of what, prince?"

"I may not say: that is the secret of the state. Jacopo!"

An officer of the police, in his uniform, advanced into the room, and bowed respectfully.

"I wait the commands of his excellency."

"I am in haste, Jacopo, and precede you in my departure. I confide this prisoner to you. Let him be taken at once before the Council of Three."

The prince, after bowing his venerable head to all present, went out.

"I knew how it would be," cried the duenna, wringing her hands, and weeping bitterly.

"Francesca was I not right? And when the prince could betray you so unmercifully as to wed you, knowing me to be alive, ought you to have been more tender with him?"

"If the prince has done wrong, I