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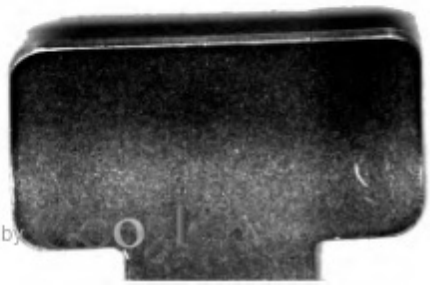

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THE CLOCK AND THE KEY

BY

ARTHUR HENRY VESEY

AUTHOR OF "A CHEQUE FOR THREE THOUSAND"
"A PEDIGREE IN PAWN," ETC.

NEW YORK
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
1906

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THE CLOCK AND THE KEY

CHAPTER I

Our gondola, far out on the lagoon, hardly moved. But neither Jacqueline nor I, under the red and white striped awning, cared much, and Pietro even dared to light a cigarette.

Silver-gray dome, campanile, and spire gleamed through the golden haze that hung over the enchanted city. A great stillness was over all—only the ripple of Pietro's lazy oar, and faintly, very faintly, bells chiming.

"I have dreamed of it," said Jacqueline. "Only the dreams were such futile things compared with the reality. I close my eyes. I open them quickly. I am afraid it will all be blown away, vanish in a single moment. But there it is, your dear, dear Venice—the green garden away up there; the white Riva, basking in the sunlight; the rosy palace; and the red and orange sails, drifting slowly along. We shall return to the Piazza presently, and St. Mark's will be

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there, and the pigeons, and the white palaces. Oh, there is not a false note to destroy the perfect charm of Venice, not one."

I aroused myself. While Jacqueline had been intoxicated with the beauty of Venice, I had been intoxicated with the beauty of Jacqueline. I must say something, and something prosaic, or I should be forgetting myself.

"Oh, favored of the gods," I murmured, "to be dead to unpleasant sights and sounds. And yet, not in Paradise, not even in this Paradise, are they quite shut out. Look, there is a penny steamer making its blatant way from the Molo to the Giudecca. And that far-off rumble is the express crossing the long bridge from Mestre. And, whew, that's the twelve-o'clock whistle at the Arsenal. There you have three notes of progress and civilization in this city of dead dreams and dead hopes."

Jacqueline turned in her seat and looked at me curiously.

"My dear Richard, will you answer me one question?"

"Gladly, if it is not too difficult. But don't forget, Jacqueline, Venice is not exactly an intellectual center."

"Then tell me, please, why it is that when you were in New York, hardly two months ago, you

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talked so charmingly of your Venetian skies and still lagoons that you quite made me long for them. But now, when I am at last under one of your wonderful skies and on your wonderful lagoon, instead of helping me to love it all, and sympathizing with me, you insist on the horrible things that clash—things I would so gladly forget for the happy moment."

"Because," I answered gravely, "I must not allow myself to forget that one happy moment is not a lifetime."

"Really, I don't understand you."

She looked at me frankly—too frankly—that was the trouble. I hesitated. In spite of the flimsy excuses her aunt had suspiciously erected, I had brought Jacqueline alone with me here to tell her why I must not allow myself to love her; and, I may add, to hear her laugh to delicious scorn my reasons. And yet I hesitated. Sometimes I felt she cared for me. But if I answered her question truthfully, I risked a cruel awakening.

"Do you know how long I have been living in Venice?" I asked presently, with apparent irrelevance.

"Three years, is it not?"

"That is a long time to be dreaming and loafing, isn't it?"

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"Yes." Her eyes looked gravely out on the lagoon.

"And it seems to you hardly a manly, strenuous life for a man of—shall we say—thirty years of age, to spend three years rocking himself to sleep, as it were, in a gondola?"

"No," she laughed nervously; "hardly a strenuous life."

"Such a life as that," I persisted, "must contrast rather unfavorably with the lives of men you know in New York, for example?"

"I suppose one may spend one's life well even here in Venice."

I laughed rather bitterly.

"One gets up at ten," I murmured. "One has coffee in bed, and dawdles over the papers. A gentle, gentle walk till twelve—to the garden, perhaps—oh, you can walk miles in Venice, though most tourists think not. At twelve, breakfast at Florian's on the Piazza. A long smoke, perhaps a row to the Lido and a swim, if it is summer. At five another long smoke and incidentally a long drink on the Piazza again, and the band. At seven, dinner at the Grundewald, a momentous affair, when one hesitates ten minutes over the menu. Then another long smoke out in the lagoon, under the stars, with the lights of Venice in the distance, and in the distance, too,

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the herd of tourists, splitting their gloves in ecstasy over the efforts of the tenor robusto under the balconies of the Grand Hotel. And then, wicked, dreamless slumber. The next morning, the same thing over again."

Jacqueline gasped. She looked at me with a curious intentness, and I was uneasy under her gaze. I knew she was noting quite ruthlessly that I was getting fat.

"It is difficult to keep quite fit in Venice," I pleaded.

"And you really have done that for three years," she said at last, almost in admiration. It was as if I were a strange animal doing clever tricks.

"For three years, barring flights to New York and London in January and February, and a few weeks in the Tyrol during July and August," I answered steadily.

"And you really like it?" she asked, still wonderingly.

"I can never imagine myself liking it again. I have despised myself since last Tuesday."

"Since last Tuesday!" she echoed, and then blushed. It was on Tuesday that Jacqueline and her aunt had arrived in Venice. "But you are not answering my first question."

"I am answering it in a roundabout way," I

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replied dreamily. Then quite abruptly, "You didn't know me until I was at Oxford, did you?"

"No."

"I was sent to Eton when I was a sickly, timid little chap of fourteen. I had had a lonely life of it in New York. My mother was so afraid I should have a good time like other boys, and shout and play and talk with an American accent, that she chained me to a priggish English tutor, who took me for solemn walks in the park for recreation. I was hardly any better off than the pale-faced little idiots you see marching about Rome and Palermo two by two, dressed up in ridiculous uniforms of broadcloth, and carrying canes—not so well off, for there are many of them, and only one slovenly priest. But my keeper had me all to himself. Think of it, I never held a baseball in my little fist. Imagine that kind of a youngster set down in the midst of half a thousand lusty young English schoolboys, and an American at that."

"Poor little homesick boy," she murmured. "And then?"

"Just five years of being shunned and moping and long solitary rows on the river, and dreams bad for a boy of my years—just a long stretch of that sort of thing, that was my life at the public school.

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"At Oxford it was pretty much the same. I pulled through in a listless sort of fashion and got my degree. But the habits of boyhood told now. I found it harder than ever to get into things. I found myself more and more the mere spectator of life—not a happy existence, nor a good foundation for an American to begin the duties of life with."

"I should think not," said Jacqueline severely. If she had pity for the lonely little boy, she had no mercy for the man. "And so because you idled through college and liked it, you came here to Venice to idle away the rest of your life?" she asked with some scorn.

"Well, it was hardly so deliberate as that," I said patiently. "No, I went back to America, and for the first time came face to face with my father. At least it was the first time that he had taken the trouble to speak to me in a heart-to-heart sort of way. You know my father well, so I needn't expatiate on his virtues."

Jacqueline smiled. But no malice hovered on her lips as on mine. American women are supposed to demand much of their husbands and fathers. But at least they respect the husbands and fathers who toil that they may play. So she answered primly:

"I have always found your father a most in-

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teresting man. I know he loves you in his way. That you have so little ambition is the bitter disappointment of his life. He has often spoken of you to me."

"Yes, yes," I said hurriedly, "no doubt he loves me in his own fashion. But we hardly understand each other. The morning after I landed from England, after I had taken my degree, he called me into his office and asked me without any preliminaries what I thought I was fit for. I told him that I really hadn't any idea. He thumped his great fist on his desk and roared: 'So far, young man, your mother has had her turn. She's mammied you, and made a fool of you with your English education and English accent. Now it's my turn. Go back to Germany. Stay there two years and come back a chemist. I want you to help me in the factory.'

"I never dreamed of opposing him. I was rather relieved to get out of his presence. So I took the check that he handed to me, and shook him dutifully by the hand. 'Good-by,' he said, 'and when I say a chemist, I mean a good chemist. If you aren't that, you needn't bother to come back at all.' The next morning I engaged passage for Bremen."

"The rest I know about," said Jacqueline, looking at her watch.

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"I dare say, only I should like you to understand it from my point of view. I went to Berlin. My name was entered on the roll of students of the university. I drank a lot of beer, but I studied very little chemistry. At the end of my two years' probation, I began to think with apprehension of my father's parting words: 'And a good chemist, or you needn't trouble to come back.'

"And then, one day, when I was quite at a loss what to do, I received word that my mother had died suddenly. She left me a small fortune.

"I dreaded more than ever to return to my father. Why should I? I began to ask myself. Why should I? echoed my one friend.

"This friend was a wizened, eccentric, boastful little man, but with an undying enthusiasm for the rare and the beautiful. He spoke cunning words to entice me: 'Your father's idea of a successful life is one of work and yet more work—of tasks and habits that bind one more and more inexorably as the years go on. This is not success at all, but the direst failure. A life made up of habits and tasks that safely steer one through one's existence, minute by minute, is a life with all the excitement and keen delight and ecstasy left out. To live such a life is to be a machine and no man.

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"'Come,' he said, 'with me to Venice. I will show you how to live. Why should you go back to America and the hideous? There are millions of fools to labor doggedly—to keep the world a-going—why should you be dragged into the ranks of the slaves to the lash? There are thousands to agonize and strive, to create the beautiful—and to fail, terribly. Why should you be dragged into the ranks of those slaves to an ideal? There are hundreds to make the world better. Why should you be a slave to conscience? But there are so few to make a fine art of living. Be one of them. Enjoy perfectly. Enjoy wisely. Life may be for you something so rare and beautiful that the horrible and the vulgar shall not exist for you.' I listened to him. I came to Venice. Here I am."

"There is something rather fine about it all," said Jacqueline wistfully. "But there's sophistry somewhere. And it seems brutally selfish."

"Sophistry! Selfish! How subtle the sophistry and selfishness I alone can tell. Dear Jacqueline, I had left one thing out of my calculations in building this fool's paradise."

"And that?" Jacqueline looked troubled. I know she pitied me.

"I had forgotten that one may love."

I leaned over toward her. Regardless of

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Pietro, who, I knew, was squinting through the red and white striped awning, I took her hand. "Dear Jacqueline, do you think that it is too late for me to begin again?"

Jacqueline was silent. She withdrew her hand gently. I had felt it tremble in mine.

"Do you see now that I am answering your question?" I asked. "When I was in New York, and knew at last that I should always love you, I had to keep reminding myself that *this* was my world. I had set before myself an ideal. I must be faithful to it. So, now, when you are in Venice, I have tried to remind myself just as strongly that you come from the world of the penny steamboat and factory—a workaday world—a relentless world. In that world men tear and rend one another for a name, for a position. Each one is for himself, ruthless of others, unscrupulous often. Each one strives madly for something that is just out of his reach. That is the world you come from. I have reminded myself of it over and over. But it's no use. I can't keep silent. I must speak. Jacqueline, I love you."

She sat motionless. Her eyes looked out on the lagoon. Then she clasped her knees, and looked at me with a curious intentness. When she did speak, it was so slowly, so decisively that her words sounded like an inexorable fate.

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"My dear Richard, you are an extraordinary man. You are one of the rare specimens who hold a perfectly impossible ideal. When you fail to attain that ideal, you frankly abandon yourself to materialism—a materialism that smothers you. You have not even attempted to play the man. It is incredible that you should deliberately lay yourself down to loll on a flowery bed of ease for three years. Your very last words about my poor world show how great a gulf is fixed between you and me. Yes, I am of that world. I glory in it. But you sneer at the very qualities you lack. That is so easy, and, forgive me, so weak. You call my poor world ruthless. But often ruthlessness, yes, and unscrupulousness even, go with strength. The man I love must have a touch of this relentlessness you despise. Better that he be unscrupulous than weak. And as for patience, surely to be greatly patient is to be greatly strong. But you, my dear Dick, you are a piece of bric-à-brac, you and your ideals. You should be under a glass case. You are too *précieux* for the struggle in the world you shrink from. Return your love? Impossible. You have done nothing to deserve it."

I could not speak. She had told me the truth. Presently she looked at me. Then she touched my arm lightly.

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"I have hurt you," she pleaded.

"Well, why not?" I answered roughly. "It is the truth. But, Jacqueline, is your answer quite final? If I plunge into this struggle—if I show you that I too can strive and achieve things for the woman I love, if not for myself, will you let me tell you again that I love you?"

"Can the leopard change his spots?" she asked lightly.

"That remains to be seen. Let me prove to you that I am not merely the dilettante that you see on the surface. If I have not cared to succeed before, perhaps it was because there was nothing or no one to work for. If I show you that I really have those qualities that you demand and think I lack, will you let me tell you again that I love you?"

"What could you do to show that?" asked Jacqueline softly.

"I could go back to New York to-morrow. I could join my father in business."

"To New York to-morrow!" she said in dismay.

"Yes," I cried joyously. I had caught the note of dismay.

"But I dare not advise you to do that. I could not take that responsibility unless I loved you.

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I do not love you. But if you are not fitted for business, you would surely fail."

"Would you discourage me in the attempt to do what you have condemned me for not doing?" I asked with impatience.

"It may be that here in Venice is a task."

"In Venice? Impossible."

"You told me the other day that you had once thought of writing up the legends of Venice. You said they had really never been done well. Why not attempt that?"

"Oh, that!" I exclaimed discontentedly.

"And why not?"

"It must be an entire change of life—of habits and ambition and tastes. Why not attempt something big while I am about it?"

"My dear Richard," insisted Jacqueline gently, "it makes no difference how obscure one's task is. It may be even a useless task, only one must show patience and strength in the performance of it."

"Jacqueline, you are giving me hope."

She held up her gloved hand, smiling.

"No, I give you no hope. Nor do I give you reason to despair. I do not love you, now. I could not love such a one as you. Whether I could love you if you were different—if you had ambition and stamina—I can not tell."

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"I shall yet make you love me, Jacqueline."

Our eyes met for one instant, then hers fell before my steady gaze.

"Will you please tell the gondolier to row faster? I shall be late for luncheon, and I have an appointment at three."

"Then I sha'n't see you this afternoon?"

"Perhaps. If you care to accompany my aunt and myself on a little expedition."

"I shall be delighted. And where?"

"To an old Venetian palace on the Grand Canal. We are to inspect it from garret to basement. A dealer in antiquities is to take us there. He is to buy the contents of the palace as they stand. You know my aunt, Mrs. Gordon, is never so happy as when buying some useless piece of bric-à-brac."

"Beware of the dealer in bric-à-brac here in Venice. He is a Jew, your dealer—be sure of that."

"Oh, no, he is not. Aunt and I know him well. He is an American."

"His name?"

"St. Hilary. He has an immense shop on Fifth Avenue."

"St. Hilary!" I exclaimed, "and he is here in Venice!"

"Do you know him?"

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"Why, this St. Hilary is the man I told you of," I answered slowly, "who first charmed me into coming to Venice. He is responsible for my wasting these past three years. I feel a grudge against him for that. He owes me some reparation. Yes; I shall be interested in seeing your palace with St. Hilary as guide. When shall I meet you?"

"Outside Florian's, on the Piazza at three. But you have not yet aroused your gondolier."

I poked Pietro with my walking-stick. Pietro flung away his cigarette and bent to his oar. The gondola, like a thing of life, leaped joyously toward the Molo.

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CHAPTER II

My rooms were in a wonderful old palace in the unfashionable quarter of the Giudecca. From the windows, precisely opposite the Salute, I had the finest view in Venice. That made them worth while. But the principal charm of the location for me lay in the fact that here the ubiquitous tripper rarely puts foot.

At a quarter to three I boarded a penny steamer from the Fondamenta della Croce, the broad sunny quay in front of my palace, and crossed over to the Molo. It was the first time in three years that I had used this humble craft. The penny steamer, be it understood, was a part of the new *régime*. It stood for hustle and democratic haste, the qualities in which dear Jacqueline had found me so sadly lacking.

It gave me an immense satisfaction—this little voyage. I paid my soldo to the shabby, uniformed conductor; I watched him uncurl the rope from the post; I heard the steersman shout down his hollow tube the directions to the engineer in his cubby-hole below; I seated myself between an unshaven priest and a frowsy old woman

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with a basket of eels; and it all appealed to me as fresh and interesting.

The world was very bright that afternoon. The sky had never seemed so blue. There was something for me to do—what, I did not know precisely (for I had not taken Jacqueline's suggestion very seriously), but somewhere I should find my task, and so win Jacqueline's complete love and regard. In the meanwhile I was to see her.

I leaped ashore, the first of the passengers, and walked briskly across the Piazzetta. I saw them immediately at one of the little black tables outside of Florian's—St. Hilary in the center, and Mrs. Gordon and Jacqueline on either side. St. Hilary was talking—as usual.

He evinced no surprise at seeing me. That was not his way. He did not even shake hands. He merely saluted me with his rattan cane, and continued to talk—as usual.

"Then it is the beauty of Venice that impresses you both?" he was saying. "The beauty! I am weary of the cry. Let me tell you that there is something infinitely more appealing to one than beauty in Venice, if one knows precisely how to look for it and where."

"And what is that?" asked Mrs. Gordon, as St. Hilary paused.

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"It is its mystery," he said impressively.

"Its mystery!" repeated vaguely Jacqueline's aunt. "And why its mystery?"

"Listen. I wish you to understand. It is night. You are quite alone—you and your gondolier. And it is late—very late. All Venice is asleep. You drift slowly down the Grand Canal. You hear nothing but the weird cry, '*stai-li oh*,' as a gondolier approaches a corner. Above are the stars, and in the dark waters about you are stars—a thousand of them—reflected in a thousand rivulets. On this side and on that—dumb as the dead—are the despoiled palaces. They suffer in silence. They are desecrated. Their glory is departed. Some of them are lodging-houses, a glass-factory, a post-office, a shop of cheap and false antiquities. But Pesaro and Contarini once dwelt in them. Titian and Giorgione adorned their walls. Within was the splendor of the Renaissance—cloth of gold—priceless tapestries—bronzes—pictures—treasures of the East—of Constantinople, of far-off Tartary. Everything of beauty in the whole world found its way at some time within those barred gates.

"But where is it now—all that treasure, that beauty? Has every temple been ravaged? Has the vandal prowled in the very holy of holies?

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Are only the bare walls left? Only the very skeletons of all that pride of the flesh? Or, somewhere, hidden perhaps centuries ago—in some dark cranny—in some secret chamber—is there some forgotten masterpiece—some beauty of cunning hand, some jewel patiently waiting for one to pluck it from its obscurity? There must be. I know there is. Do you hear? I say I *know*. There, madame, you have for me the mystery of Venice."

"For you," placidly replied Mrs. Gordon, "simply because you are a dealer in antiquities. But why is Venice in that regard more mysterious than other great cities?"

I thought Mrs. Gordon right. St. Hilary's enthusiasm was far-fetched. The dapper little man, with his black, snapping eyes, his face the color of parchment, and lined as the palm of one's hand, agile as a puppet on strings, neat as a tailor's model, was in earnest, absurdly in earnest, in this idle, quaint fancy of his.

"Perhaps so," he sighed. "Say that it is the passion of the collector that talks and not the sober judgment of the dealer. And yet, and yet, it is this hope that sends me to impossible places in Persia, to Burma. Yes; it has brought me now to Venice."

"To Venice!" I cried, astonished. "You

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allow yourself to be mastered by a whim, as vague, as visionary as this?"

"My dear Hume, perhaps this whim, as you call it, is not vague or visionary to me," he replied quietly.

"But," I expostulated, "you have no proofs of your treasure. Why is it not behind the glass cases in St. Mark's yonder? Why are not your canvases in the museums? Why are not your antiquities in the shops?"

He looked at me with a strangely thoughtful expression.

"What we have never had we do not miss," he mused. "No one missed the Venus de Milo, or the Frieze of the Parthenon, or the Kohinoor. Yet we call them to-day three of the wonders of the world."

"Because there are but three of them," I said impatiently "I am afraid you must look far and wide before you find the lucky fourth."

"No doubt," he said indifferently, "no doubt." And then with apparent irrelevance, "Now one would not think that crowns were so easily lost."

"And have they been?" I asked curiously.

"Only the other day eight were found at one digging, not far from Toledo. They had been lost for a thousand years. There was a find for

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you. Then the crown of the Emperor of Austria, the holy crown, the *szenta korona*, has been lost and found no less than three times. The last time (not half a century ago) it disappeared after the defeat of Kossuth. Some said it had been taken to London; some, that it was broken up and the jewels sold in Constantinople. But for a few florins a peasant returned it as mysteriously as it had disappeared. Foolish peasant!"

"Mr. St. Hilary," expostulated Mrs. Gordon severely, "you would not have had him do otherwise?"

"I suppose not. But upon my word, sometimes I think that one might as well go in for big things as for little. There is the *Gnaga Boh*, the Dragon Lord, the most perfect ruby in the world. A half-witted creature, the widow of King Theebaw, wears it. We are great friends, that old hag and I, and I could have stolen it from her a thousand times. Some day perhaps she will give it to me. And that notorious Indian prince, Gwaikor of Baroda, has half a dozen stones of price. He, too, is a crony of mine. Nothing would be easier than to steal one of them."

"My dear Mr. St. Hilary," again interrupted Mrs. Gordon, "surely you do not contemplate burglary?"

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"That is precisely the trouble," he complained mournfully, "I have a conscience. But findings are certainly keepings."

"Ah, but it must be so difficult to find one's findings," said Jacqueline quaintly.

"Not always. Have you never heard how the Hermes of Praxiteles was discovered?"

She shook her head.

"Pausanias, an old Greek historian, wrote of that statue about a thousand years ago—how he had seen it at Olympia. There was the passage for all the world to read. He wrote precisely what there was to dig for—precisely where one was to dig. But did any one believe him? Not for a thousand years. But when, after a thousand years, a party of Germans made up their minds that perhaps there was something in the story, and dug in Olympia as he told them, there was their Hermes waiting for them. You see one may have information as to where lies one's treasure sometimes. But so few of us have faith."

"And have you your information as well as your abundant faith, St. Hilary?" I inquired with mock solicitude.

At this idle question, his heavily lidded eyes opened wide. The pupils dilated. A challenge flashed from their blue depths. I stared at him.

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But almost immediately the heavy lids drooped again.

"All this is extremely interesting, Mr. St. Hilary," said Jacqueline. "But is it not rather wide from our Venetian palace? Why do we wait?"

"Simply, my dear young lady, because the owner happens to be of a religious turn of mind; and at this moment, I believe, is confessing his sins in San Marco's yonder."

"Who is the owner of the palace?" inquired Mrs. Gordon. "And why does he wish to sell its contents?"

"The owner is a duke, the Duca da Sestos, and he wishes to sell because he is as impecunious as the rest of his tribe."

"A duke!" cried Mrs. Gordon. "How interesting! And what kind of a duke is this gentleman?"

"Of the very flower of the Italian nobility. He is a prince of good fellows, a dashing cavalier, handsome as a young god, and twenty-six."

"How *very* interesting," repeated Mrs. Gordon, and looked at Jacqueline.

The look troubled me. Jacqueline herself seemed annoyed at it. She turned to St. Hilary.

"And have you any other treasures up your sleeve, Mr. St. Hilary?"

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"My dear young lady, shall I give you an inventory of one collection I know about? I promise to make all your mouths water.

"To begin with, there is a balas-ruby, known as El Spigo, or the ear of corn. In the fifteenth century it was valued at the enormous sum of two hundred and fifty thousand ducats. Then there is the jewel, El Lupo, the wolf. It is one large diamond and three pearls. These two stones would take the eye of the vulgar. But imagine a beryl, twice as big as your thumb-nail, and on it the portrait of the pope, Clement VII, carved by none other than the great Cellini."

"I will buy it at any price," cried Jacqueline.

"Then," continued St. Hilary, touching his forefinger lightly, "there is a pale-red ruby. The stone is indifferent. But it is a cameo, and the likeness carved on it is that of Ludovico Il Moro, the Duke of Milan. Domenico de' Camei is the artist, and they called him de' Camei because he was the greatest carver of cameos in the world."

"That is mine," said Mrs. Gordon, her eyes on San Marco.

"To continue, there is a turquoise cameo, half as large as the palm of your hand, and on it is carved the Triumph of Augustus. Thirty figures are on that stone. There is an Isis head in malachite. The only other to compare with it

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is in the Hermitage collection at St. Petersburg. Few portraits of Beatrice d'Este exist. One of them is carved on one of my stones, and is known as a diamond portrait. Imagine a thin plate of diamonds, evenly polished on both sides with little facets on the edges. The diamonds make, as it were, the glass frame of the portrait itself, which is carved on lapis lazuli by the great Ambrosius Caradossa."

"That," I interrupted, "must be mine."

"I must not forget two curious poison-rings —one with a sliding panel; the other, still more dangerous, a lion with sharp claws—the claws hollowed and communicating with a small poison-receptacle. We must be careful how we finger that ring when we take our treasure out of the casket. Yes; and the casket itself is worth looking at. By an ingenious system of clockwork, the cover could not be opened in less than twelve hours."

"And where, where are all these treasures?" demanded Mrs. Gordon, taking her eyes from the cathedral for the moment.

"My dear lady, so far as I know, they are here in Venice."

"In Venice!" I cried.

"But, unfortunately, they disappeared nearly five hundred years ago."

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There was a chorus of disappointment and reproaches. Mrs. Gordon again impatiently turned her attention to San Marco.

"And there is absolutely no clue to them?" demanded Jacqueline.

"No clue, dear lady," he murmured, spreading wide his hands.

"But at least tell us whose the gems were?" I asked.

"Ah, yes, that at least I can tell you. The gems belonged to Beatrice d'Este, Duchess of Milan and wife of Ludovico Il Moro. She pawned them to the Doge of Venice to raise money for her husband's army."

"And they have absolutely disappeared?" I insisted.

"As if they had never existed. But they do exist, and here in Venice. Think of it! In Venice. And now, perhaps, my dear Hume, you can understand the fascination of Venice for me." He sighed deeply.

"But why are you reminded of them so particularly this afternoon?" I persisted curiously.

"Because we are going to see the box that is said to have contained the casket."

"In the palace of our duke?" asked Jacqueline's aunt.

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St. Hilary bowed. "In the palace of our duke, madame."

"And how did it come there?" I asked in my turn.

"It is said that the duke's ancestor, a great goldsmith in Venice——"

He ended his sentence abruptly. "Here comes our duke," he said.

I looked up. The dealer in antiquities had not exaggerated his charms. He was tall. His figure was as noble as his carriage. His hand rested lightly on his sword-hilt. His bold eyes, of a piercing blue, searched Jacqueline's lovely face. He had the all-conquering air of a young god. His eyes wandered to mine. We looked steadily at each other. We measured each other. Instinctively I distrusted him.

St. Hilary made the introductions. "I have asked my friends to go with me. I have not taken too great a liberty?" he said in French.

"Not at all," assured the duke. "I am only sorry I have kept the ladies waiting. My launch is waiting at the Molo. Shall we go at once?"

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CHAPTER III

THE Palazzo da Sestos was for many years one of the sights of the Grand Canal. It is not more beautiful than a score of others. Its sole distinction lay in the fact that its faded green shutters had been barred for something more than half a century. Other palaces are closed for a year—for ten years. But for fifty years no butcher or baker boy had pulled the rusty bell-rope at the little rear street—no gondola had paused at its moss-grown steps. It had acquired something of mystery. It was pointed out to the tourist as inevitably as the glass-factory of Salviati.

But to-day the wide iron gates stood open. The steam-launch swept between the palace steps and the huge spiles, still proud in their very decrepitude, crowned with the corno and adorned with the da Sestos coat of arms. A servant, shaking and bobbing his white old head, stood on the marble steps that dipped down to the water.

We entered the echoing hall, and an indescribable odor of damp mortar and dust made us

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cough. Something scurried across the red and white marble flags. A bat, blinded by the sudden light, swirled about the hall in circles. Mrs. Gordon shivered and clutched the duke's arm. Jacqueline gathered up her skirts carefully about her. There was something unclean and uncanny about the place.

The lofty hall ran through the palace. Beyond was another iron gate, opening on the garden, now a wild confusion of clambering grape-vines and ivy and myrtle, that rioted up the crumbling walls and choked and twined themselves about the broken statuary and the yellow-stained well-curb. On either side of the hall were stone benches, and over each long seat the da Sestos coat of arms again, the strange insignia of a protruding hand clasping a huge key. Doors to the right and left led to the Magazzini, or store-rooms, in which, years ago, when Venice was the mistress of the world in commerce, the *nobili* stored their merchandise. St. Hilary, who had unconsciously taken the lead, cast a disdainful eye on the bare walls, and hurried to the stair-way.

At the landing we paused. Two massively carved doors faced us, the one opening on the Sala Grande, the other to a long succession of

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small reception-rooms, leading one out of the other. Luigi tremblingly unlocked the doors of the Sala, and threw them back with ceremony, holding high above his head a flickering candle.

We stood without, peering into the darkness, while the old man tottered across the vast room and unbarred a shutter. The candle shone pale in the light of day. He pushed open a window, and a faint breeze touched our cheeks. One breathed again. The sun streamed on the shining floor of colored cement, gaily embedded with little pieces of marble. I looked about me.

Great yellow sheets shrouded everything—the tapestries, the pictures, the furniture. St. Hilary tore the sheets down impatiently, Luigi looking from master to dealer in troubled amazement and indignation. At last the noble room stood revealed. The little frivolous company of smartly dressed men and women in flannels and muslins seemed strangely like intruders in this great apartment of faded magnificence and mournful grandeur.

Flemish tapestries covered the vast expanse of the walls. Throne-chairs in Genoese velvet and brocade and stamped leather, each with the inevitable arms in gold appliqué, were ranged formally side by side. There was a magnificent

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center-table, the heavy malachite top with its mosaic center and Etruscan border, supported by four elaborately carved winged goddesses. There were antique Spanish and Italian cabinets of tortoise-shell and ivory and ebony. At either end of the room were two cavernous fireplaces, the pilasters covered with exquisitely carved cherubs and Raphaelesque scrolls. Vases of verde; trousseau-chests of ebony; consol-tables of bronze and ormulu; jewel-boxes of jasper and lapis lazuli; clocks of bronze and Sienna marble; marble busts; portières of silk and velvet; Florentine mirrors; Venetian chandeliers of pink and white and blue Venetian glass—all belonged to the Venice of the Renaissance—to Venice in its splendor.

"I suppose," said the duke, looking about, "this old room has had its chairs and tables standing precisely as you see them for two hundred years."

"And, now," said Mrs. Gordon reproachfully, "you dare to despoil it? Were I you, it would sadden me to sell at a price these dumb things to that terrible dealer, darting about with his note-book from treasure to treasure."

"*Per Baccho!*" laughed the duke. "Why should I have any sentiment for a place and for things that are as strange to me as to you? They

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have only recently become mine, and that by an accident. If Luigi, now, were having his say, it might be different, eh, old man?"

Luigi had been dogging the footsteps of the dealer, replacing the coverings. He looked up anxiously.

"What! his Excellency is to sell this palace?" he faltered.

"All," said the duke lightly, and ignored him. "You must know, ladies, that the uncle, by whose timely death I inherited the palace, was the last Venetian of our name. He never set foot in this palace, I am told. He lived abroad. The traditions of these Venetians were not his. Nor are they mine. I prefer to make traditions of my own. I am from Turin. There, one is at least in the world. There, one has ambitions for power and glory."

"With ambition you will arrive far," said Mrs. Gordon adoringly.

"But these Venetians, bah, I know them!" he continued. "To gossip a little, to dawdle over their silly newspapers at the Café Quadri—to eat, to drink, to flirt—that is their dream of happiness. They are rocked to sleep in their wonderful gondolas. They drift on the smooth surface of their sluggish canals out to the great sea of oblivion. No. The silent waterways of this

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melancholy, faded Venice are not exactly paths of glory."

"No," said Jacqueline, and perhaps unconsciously she looked at me.

I deserved the reproachful glance, no doubt. I should have borne it meekly enough had not the duke noticed it as well as myself. As he led the way through the reception-rooms, he stared curiously at me, and then at Jacqueline. He smiled. My vague dislike became more definite.

These reception-rooms were monotonously alike. Our interest began to flag. But the indefatigable dealer of antiquities had seen enough to awaken his enthusiasm. It was natural that he should peer and pry. It was his business, I suppose, to finger brocades, to try the springs of chairs. But there was not a trousseau-chest whose cover he did not lift, an armoire or cabinet that he did not look within. I thought his eagerness bordered almost on vulgarity, until I remembered the box that held the da Sestos cabinet. He was looking for it, of course.

At last he gave a little cry of satisfaction. He turned to Mrs. Gordon. We had reached the last of the *camerini*.

"You will remember, madame, I was telling you an extraordinary story of the lost gems of the Beatrice d'Este. It is true that I can not

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show you the jewels. Nor the casket that contained the jewels. But if it would interest you to see the box that contained the casket, behold it!"

He touched lightly with his cane a steel chest that stood on a consol-table.

"And how are you to prove this?" asked Mrs. Gordon, a little skeptically.

St. Hilary pointed to the cover. On it was engraved: "*Giovanni da Sestos fecit, 1525.*"

"A da Sestos made the casket for the jewels!" exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, glancing at the duke.

"It is a matter of history," replied St. Hilary.

"Jewels!" cried the duke. "What is this about a da Sestos making a casket for jewels?"

"I was amusing the ladies this afternoon with the story of the mysterious disappearance of the D'Este gems. As a matter of fact, they did not merely disappear, Mrs. Gordon. They were stolen, and stolen, if the legend be true, from one of his Grace's ancestors."

"An ancestor of mine?" cried the duke. "Impossible."

"He was a marvelous artist and clock-maker," returned St. Hilary coolly. "He was the first Venetian of his name to become famous, though I believe his end was rather tragic."

"You seem to know a great deal about the

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affairs of my family, Mr. St. Hilary. It is strange that I have never heard of this ancestor and his casket."

"Not so strange," replied the dealer, "seeing that nearly five hundred years have passed since then. As to the casket, it is a curiosity, and a matter of history. There are few curiosities in the world that escape the notice of us dealers in antiquities. It is our business to know about them."

"Perhaps you will enlighten me as to this strange story," said the duke.

"Some day," promised St. Hilary carelessly. "Any day, in fact, that you have half an hour to smoke a cigar with me at Florian's." Then he turned to old Luigi, who was nervously fumbling with his keys. "Have we seen everything? All the rooms?"

The old man bowed. "Everything, signore."

"That door, where does it lead?"

Luigi pressed down the handle and threw it open.

"Good heavens, Mr. St. Hilary!" cried the duke, "are you looking for the gems you have been romancing about? Surely by this time you have seen everything."

The dealer paid little heed to the duke's remonstrances. He was fingering the tapestries. The

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duke turned to the ladies with a gesture of annoyance.

"Shall we now leave this mad dealer to his own devices? It would please me very much if both of you would choose some souvenir of our delightful afternoon. I am reluctant to let the terrible American have everything. Shall we go to the reception-rooms again? It is there that we shall find the more interesting pieces of bric-à-brac."

The duke and the ladies left the sala, old Luigi leading the way. Myself his Grace had ignored completely.

I turned listlessly to join St. Hilary. To my astonishment he absolutely disappeared. I walked the full length of the sala, quite mystified; for I had observed only one exit.

As I stood in a dim corner of the vast apartment one of the tapestries opposite shook. St. Hilary emerged from behind it. He glanced around the room an instant, and then, thinking himself unseen, he walked rapidly into the reception-room after the others.

My curiosity was thoroughly aroused. I lifted the tapestry in my turn and felt along the wall behind it.

Sudddenly this wall gave way to the pressure of my hand. I had pushed open a door.

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I found myself in a narrow chamber, hardly larger than a coat-closet. I struck a match. But before I could explore the interior, the tapestry was lifted once more, and Lugi appeared, the lighted candle still in his hand.

"What is the signore doing in there?" he demanded with an anxiety that seemed to me rather uncalled for.

"I thought that you had shown all the apartments, Luigi?"

"But his Excellency will be annoyed if he sees you here," persisted the old servant.

"Not at all," said a cold voice, and the duke entered, followed by the others.

"My dear Richard," laughed Jacqueline, "this is deliciously mysterious. So you have actually discovered a hidden chamber?"

"Quite what one might expect in an old Venetian palace," added Mrs. Gordon. "Now if you have found Mr. St. Hilary's jewels, it will be perfect."

"I doubt if my friend Hume has wit enough to have made the discovery that it is nothing but a bare chamber," cried the dealer, darting at me a look of intense annoyance.

"Oh, it is no discovery of mine," I said calmly. "I have merely followed where St. Hilary led."

"As a dealer in antiquities I am naturally in-

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terested in curiosities, even in curious chambers."

"All the same, your knowledge of my palace is rather extraordinary—even for a dealer in antiquities," cried the duke.

St. Hilary took the lighted candle from the servant.

"If you were a better Venetian," he retorted, "and were familiar with the archives of the Frari, you would know that the Inquisition of Venice had plans of every palace in the city. I happen to have examined them. That is all."

"But your Excellency will observe," said old Luigi unconcernedly, "that the room is quite empty."

"Yes, yes," agreed the dealer, pushing us gently without.

"No, not quite," I said, looking at him keenly. "What is this on the shelf here?"

"A clock!" exclaimed Jacqueline.

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CHAPTER IV

It stood on a stone shelf built out from the wall as high as one could reach.

"Tut, tut, a broken-down clock," cried St. Hilary contemptuously. "Nothing could be more useless and uninteresting," and he blew out the candle.

We trooped into the sala again.

"And now, Duke, having thoroughly explored your house beautiful, even to the recesses of the hidden and mysterious chamber, I'm quite prepared to make you an offer at your convenience."

"There is all the time in the world for that, Mr. St. Hilary," replied the duke impatiently. "The ladies have not yet chosen their souvenirs. What gift will you honor me by accepting?" He turned to Jacqueline.

She hesitated, and looked at Mrs. Gordon.

"My dear Jacqueline," encouraged her aunt, "I am sure Mr. St. Hilary will not make his offer much less for anything that you might choose."

"No," said the dealer, making figures in his note-book, "I have quite decided on the sum.

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Let me recommend to your notice this faience pitcher. I assure you it is rare. You can see for yourself that it is beautiful."

"If it is really of no value in itself," said Jacqueline, disregarding St. Hilary's pitcher, "there is nothing that appeals to me more than that steel box. Mr. St. Hilary's story has quite touched my imagination."

"It is already yours. And now what will madame choose?"

"Could I examine that decrepit old clock in the hidden room again? I happen to be making a collection of clocks."

"Then you can make no mistake about this superb spécimen in Sienna marble," urged the dealer.

"But, like Jacqueline," smilingly protested Mrs. Gordon, "I prefer something that has a touch of mystery about it. And that old clock, shut up in the darkness there, one knows not how many years, ought to have a history."

"But it is so very, very old," cried old Luigi deprecatingly. "It has not gone for two hundred years."

"That hardly makes it less interesting," I said dryly. "Let us see the clock by all means." The reluctance of both St. Hilary and Luigi had struck me as being rather strange.

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"Your Excellency surely does not mean to give it away? It is an heirloom of the family," expostulated old Luigi obstinately.

"I have told you to bring it out," commanded the duke.

Very reluctantly the old man entered the little chamber.

"It is too heavy," he cried from within. "I can not lift it."

Duke da Sestos and myself went to his assistance. Together we carried it to the sala and placed it on the center-table. The slight jar set a number of bells ringing in musical confusion.

Certainly it was unique—at least I had never seen anything like it.

Imagine an oblong box of bronze, about as long as one's arm, and three-quarters as high. Around three sides of this box ran a little platform, heavily gilded. Immediately above this platform were twelve doors, three at either end, and six at the face. It was almost bare of ornament, except that on the top had been three figures. The heads and arms of all three were now broken off.

"Its very simplicity and ugliness interest one," cried Mrs. Gordon with enthusiasm. "And those twelve doors certainly mean that it is an automaton, do they not, Mr. St. Hilary? One can imagine the stiff little figures that appear,

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each at its hour, and at their respective doors—kings with their crowns of gold, ginger-bread Virgins, prelates with their miters, and armored knights. Each figure in its hour does its devoirs, I suppose, and disappears again."

"At every shake of the table," said Jacqueline, "its bells clang angrily. You might think it was offended at being disturbed after its long sleep of two hundred years."

"Yes," confessed the duke, looking at the clock thoughtfully, "it awakes a fantastic note that will strike in the fancy of the most dull. Think what stories of love and intrigue it has listened to! What deeds of revenge and hate it has looked down upon! At what hours of agony and ecstasy have those bells not chimed? What death-knells to hopes, what peals of love and happiness!"

Jacqueline had been turning the clock slowly around. Suddenly she sank on her knees to examine it more closely, and read aloud:

Se mi guardi con cura,
Se mi ascolti con attenzione,
E se, nell' intendermi, tu Sei cosi acorto
com' io lo sono nel dirti—
T' arridera la Fortuna.

"Will you translate it for me, please?"

"'If you guard me carefully, if you listen to me diligently, if you are as clever in understand-

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ing me as I am in telling you, Fortune will smile on you,'" translated the duke.

"The delicious braggart!" cried Mrs. Gordon delightedly. "Now what do you think that brave promise means, Mr. St. Hilary?"

"Pooh, pooh, madame! It promises too much to mean anything. 'Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy and wealthy and wise.' 'Time is money'—there are a score of proverbs as vague and as meaningless."

"Oh, but you mustn't cast any aspersions on my dear clock. Perhaps Luigi can read the riddle more cleverly. Do you know if there is any legend connected with the clock?"

The old man hesitated.

"Come, come, speak up," said the duke roughly.

"Ah, yes, your Excellency," replied the old man. "But I implore you not to sell or give away the clock. You will always regret it. Good luck goes with the clock, your Excellency."

"But the motto," urged Mrs. Gordon. "Has it any meaning?"

"Yes, yes, signora. It means that each hour brings its own gift, if one can only understand. One may never suffer, not hunger nor cold, not poverty nor disappointment, if one can only read the secret of each hour. For at every hour some-

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thing wonderful is told. And the clock is a charm against the Evil One. My father told me, and his father told him. Yes; we have guarded it carefully in that quiet room. It has stood there as long as I can remember. And now your Excellency will give it away! Misfortune will come; I know it."

"Be still, imbecile. Madame, shall I have the clock taken to my launch for you?"

"Oh, don't deprive the old man of his charm against the evil eye, aunt," said Jacqueline lightly, half pitying, half mocking the old servant's distress.

"I would remind Miss Quintard that it is I who am deprived of the charm, if there is any, and not Luigi," laughed the duke.

"I would be the last one to bring you ill fortune," jested Mrs. Gordon. Then very slowly, "But I intend to bring you good fortune, not to take it away from you."

"I am hoping precisely for that," said the duke gravely, and looked at Jacqueline.

Jacqueline was still kneeling before the clock.

"How I should like to know what you really mean, foolish legend," she said wistfully.

I leaned on the table and stooped toward her.

"If one were to run down that legend, it would require patience and perseverance enough to sat-

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isfy even you, would it not, Jacqueline?" I asked lightly.

She smiled, but seeing that I was half in earnest, became serious.

"Yes," she said slowly, "I believe it would."

"Then, Jacqueline, when I begin my legends of Venice, shall I take up first the legend of this old clock?"

"Do," she said carelessly. "Aunt would thank you, I know."

I walked over to the window, and looked gloomily without. I had hoped Jacqueline was in earnest when she suggested that I should write a book on the legends of Venice. But now that I wished to take her desire seriously, she was evidently inclined to laugh at me.

"Will you clap your hands for the servant in my launch to come up?" asked the duke. "I wish him to carry the clock down for Mrs. Gordon."

"One moment, please," said St. Hilary. "I am collector enough to understand Mrs. Gordon's enthusiasm. But being a dealer as well as a collector, I cannot allow this enthusiasm to interfere with my pocket-book. I know, Mrs. Gordon, you would never forgive me if I did not say that my sneers at the value of the clock were the pre-

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tense of the dealer who depreciates a thing that he may get it the cheaper. The clock, madame, is a valuable antique. The value of the things in this palace will be lowered considerably if it is not included in its contents."

There was an awkward pause. The duke reddened with anger.

"In that case," said Mrs. Gordon, greatly embarrassed, "I could not dream, of course——"

"Mr. St. Hilary," said the duke coldly, "the clock is not for sale to you at any price. Madame, you will not offend me by refusing?"

Mrs. Gordon gazed at her niece in perplexity.

"You would find it rather difficult to carry it about with you in Europe," said Jacqueline lamely.

"Yes, I am afraid I should," declared Mrs. Gordon with alacrity.

"If you will entrust the task to me, I shall be charmed to have it packed and sent to America for you," volunteered St. Hilary. He seemed eager to atone for his ill-timed remarks of a moment before.

"But Mr. Hume tells me he is going to write a book on the legends of Venice," interrupted Jacqueline. "A moment ago, aunt, he suggested that he might be able to discover one about this

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very clock, and I encouraged him to try. Why not let Mr. Hume take care of it during our travels?"

I professed my willingness joyfully, and though it was evident that neither the duke nor St. Hilary welcomed Jacqueline's suggestion, the clock was soon placed in a gondola I summoned.

To its chimes the fortunes of da Sestos and myself were to dance merrily.

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CHAPTER V

THE day following I was strangely depressed. I had run the gantlet of hope and doubt. Jacqueline's various moods had baffled me. And the duke—frankly, I feared him. Jacqueline had so obviously admired him. He stood for the very qualities that I lacked. The glamour of his name, the luxurious environment he scorned so vigorously, his verve, and, above all, his alliance with Mrs. Gordon, made him a formidable rival. For that Mrs. Gordon, in some subtle way, had already come to a vague understanding with him, I did not doubt.

Two letters were on the tray that brought in my morning coffee. One from Jacqueline; the other from her brother. They called to me in quite different directions. Jacqueline to her side; the brother to his assistance in Rome. The young fool was in trouble—trouble serious enough to demand the assistance of one who had influence with the authorities. I happened to fill that position. I must go to his aid.

In Jacqueline's letter I fancied I read a tenderness that was altogether new and delightful.

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It was no longer the reserved Jacqueline that spoke. There was a delightful shyness, but through the shyness spoke the woman who dared to be bold for the man she loved.

She wished me to call at once. We would discuss the book together. And she had invited St. Hilary and myself to dinner that evening. After I had left them yesterday he had hinted at a wonderful story about the old clock. She would make him talk. I should have copy for one of my legends at least.

But I could not hesitate as to my destination. For, in assisting her brother, I would be doing Jacqueline a favor. Unfortunately, I could not tell her why I had to leave Venice so peremptorily. Neither she nor her aunt must know that the youngster had made an ass of himself. I wrote her merely that an affair of importance had called me to Rome. I caught the first train south.

Ten days passed before I sniffed once more the pungent odor of the lagoons. There had been complications and delays; and in his remorse the boy had had a touch of Roman fever. I could not leave him like that.

A letter from Jacqueline awaited me. It had arrived only a day or two before. Her annoyance at my sudden flight from Venice was obvious.

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She regretted my absence at her dinner, but I had not missed much. St. Hilary had refused to talk. Perhaps there was really no legend, after all. And, indeed, when one came to think over the matter calmly, was it worth while attempting to discover one? And was I really interested in writing the book—that is, for its own sake? I ought to be well assured of that. She was afraid she would not see me again for the present. They were to leave almost immediately for Bellagio.

I walked over to my window. I was bitterly hurt and disappointed.

Venice was storm-swept. The Giudecca, deserted, was lashed by wind and rain. The ships, moored near the Salute, tossed and swayed at their anchors. The goddess over the customs-house spun about on her golden ball and vainly tried to shield herself behind her flimsy veil.

The brightness and glory of Venice had vanished as in a dream. The palaces, ivory and gold in the sunlight, looked sodden and decayed in the gloom, like an old woman deprived of her rouge-pot and powder. Venice, in short, was a painting, a masterpiece, if you wish, which the mischievous fist of some mawkish infant had smeared and smudged. The pigeons, the cafés, the gondolas —they are the creatures of the sun. To-day the pigeons were huddled under the Dome of the

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Salute; the cafés deserted; the gondolas covered with tarpaulin.

But as I looked, a gondola, rowed by two oarsmen, emerged from the rain and fog. It was headed directly for the landing outside my windows. It touched the steps. The old *gransieri*, shivering in an archway, pattered across the quay with his hook. The passenger leaped ashore. It was St. Hilary. And in this weather!

I drew the portière. I walked over to the mantel and felt for a match to light the gas, for it was growing late. As I struck it, half a dozen visiting-cards caught my eye—eight, to be quite precise. One of the eight was that of the Duke da Sestos. What humble attraction had I for the noble gentleman? The seven others bore the name of St. Hilary. Seven calls in ten days! I looked at them thoughtfully. And then—why, I have no idea—I thought of the mysterious clock that Mrs. Gordon had entrusted to my care, and that I had left with a jeweler on the Piazza to see if it was quite beyond repair. It would be just as well to say nothing of that to the dealer. I was curious to know precisely the fascination that the old timepiece had for him.

"I was longing for some one to talk to. Just returned from a little trip to Rome. What's the news?"

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"Oh, I have just dropped in for a smoke. Where's your whisky? I am drenched through. The felsa of that confounded gondola leaked."

I caught the swift glance that took in every detail of my room. I waved my hand to the sideboard.

"Help yourself. I'll join you presently, when I have slipped into a bath-robe. You'll find the cigarettes by the whisky."

I stepped into my room. I heard the fizz of the siphon. I caught the fumes of his cigarette. I heard the creak of a wicker-chair as he threw himself into it. Then there was silence. I was about to rejoin him, when I happened to look into my mirror. St. Hilary was reflected in it, and he was opening a coat-closet.

I whistled noisily, and put my eye to a crack in the door. He was looking into a cabinet. Then he pulled aside the portière that hid the deep recess of the window. Another puzzled glance about the room, and he sank noiselessly into the chair. It was not difficult to put two and two together. He was looking for Mrs. Gordon's clock. Well, he should satisfy himself thoroughly that it was not on my premises. Then I would wait for his next move. I entered my sitting-room, still whistling.

"Just a word to my man, and I'm ready for

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our smoke," I said, and went into the sala. I banged the door after me, but took pains to leave it carefully ajar.

It was as I thought. He promptly slipped into my bedroom. I waited considerately for him to resume his seat before joining him.

"Well, indefatigable peerer and pryer for the rare and odd, what is the news of the past ten days?" I asked, reaching for the Scotch.

I knew he was watching me closely. The nouns were a trifle suggestive.

"No news so far as I know. I have been buried in the palazzo of the duke, making an inventory of things. Interesting old palace, eh?"

I nodded, and blew a cloud of cigarette-smoke into the air.

"Nice chap, the duke."

I nodded again.

"Extremely gallant to the ladies."

Again I nodded, but without much enthusiasm.

"Rather pretty compliment, his giving them those souvenirs."

"No one but an Italian would have thought of it."

"But I must say I was disgusted at the poor taste of the ladies."

"Why so?"

"My dear fellow, did you observe that bowl of

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majolica? Or that superb cloisonné Kioto vase? With carved ivories galore and a plaque of della Robbia to choose from, and to pick out a silly timepiece."

"Ah, yes," I remarked dryly, "you had an eye on that clock yourself, hadn't you?"

"Tut, tut, I have an eye on everything that is useless and odd. By the way, she asked you to keep it for her. I should like to have a look at it. Trot it out, my boy."

I gazed into St. Hilary's innocent blue eyes, and laughed quietly. "The other day, in Rome," I said slowly, "I met on the street a certain Captain Villari. He's as poor as the proverbial mouse, and an acquaintance. He asked me to go to the opera with him. I did not refuse, though the invitation, coming from him, surprised me. And the inevitable happened, of course. At the very box-office, he discovered with cries of consternation that he had left all his money in his other uniform. Might he dare, would I think it too presuming, if he asked me for the loan of ten lire until to-morrow?

"I assured him with all the warmth in the world that it would be a privilege. I put my hand in my pocket to oblige him. *Accidenti!* Was there ever such devilish luck! I had left my money in my morning clothes!

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"We looked at each other half a minute; then we embraced with laughter. It was such an odd coincidence. And so we went our separate ways, quite good-naturedly. He knew I was lying. I knew he had been lying. What do you think of my story?"

"What has that story to do with an old timepiece?" he blustered.

I leaned forward and tapped him on the knee.

"Only this, my crafty dealer in antiquities. You, as well as my captain, are too crafty by half. You know the timepiece is not in these rooms, just as well as I do myself."

"I don't understand you," he fumed.

"No? Then what were you looking for a minute or two ago? In that cabinet, behind the portière there? By Jove, you had the impertinence to lift the cover of my trunk in the bedroom."

If I had expected him to show shame or confusion, I was much mistaken. He stared at me a moment. Then he threw back his head and laughed.

"It wasn't nice of me, I confess," he said coolly. "I should have acted with my customary frankness, and have asked to see it first."

"I think it would have been the better way. As to this customary frankness of yours, you

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guard that virtue so closely that I am a stranger to it."

"Very well, I'll give you an instance of it. Now that my cards are on the table, what have you done with the clock?"

"Is that what you call being frank? I fail to see those cards of yours on the table even now. Play fair, St. Hilary."

"I don't understand you," he said, and his neck took on a purple tinge.

"You understand me perfectly. Just as my captain did. And I have both eyes and ears. Let me remind you, in the first place, you were perfectly well aware that the clock was in the palace. You looked for it deliberately, but slyly. When I was curious in my turn, you were hardly pleased. You pooh-poohed the chamber. You made fun of the clock. You blew out the candle promptly that no one might examine it. When Mrs. Gordon insisted on doing so, you vainly attempted to divert her interest. As a last resort, you tried to make it impossible for her to accept it by asserting that it was an antique of great value. Don't you think that was in extremely bad taste?"

"My dear fellow, desperate cases require desperate remedies."

"Ah, then you confess that you were even des-

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perately anxious to have the clock? Why should you deny it? There is nothing to be ashamed of. Your eight calls have made me quite certain of that, and the fact that you played the spy, looking into my trunk just now."

St. Hilary laughed, a little too boisterously.

"Good, good!" he cried. "I confess I didn't credit my dear dilettante with quite so observing an eye. And if I were to confess that this old clock interests me beyond belief, why should you not satisfy my curiosity? Have you any interest in it? An interest that conflicts with mine, for instance?" and he looked at me curiously.

"It is quite possible," I answered calmly.

"And this interest really conflicts with mine?"

"Why not?" I answered, smiling at him.

"Then I see no reason why I should not go my way and you yours." He picked up his hat in high dudgeon and walked toward the door.

"Nor do I," I answered, reaching for a cigar. "However, let me remind you that I still have the clock."

It may seem strange and unreasonable that I should have assumed so cautious a tone with the dealer. My interest in the clock was simply that I wished to write up the legend connected with it, if legend there was. But I browbeat him

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