

Don't Look Now

Daphne du Maurier

'Don't look now,' John said to his wife, 'but there are a couple of old girls two tables away who are trying to hypnotise me.'

Laura, quick on cue, made an elaborate pretence of yawning, then tilted her head as though searching the skies for a non-existent aeroplane.

'Right behind you,' he added. 'That's why you can't turn round at once—it would be much too obvious.'

Laura played the oldest trick in the world and dropped her napkin, then bent to scramble for it under her feet, sending a shooting glance over her left shoulder as she straightened once again. She sucked in her cheeks, the first tell-tale sign of suppressed hysteria, and lowered her head.

'They're not old girls at all,' she said. 'They're male twins in drag.'

Her voice broke ominously, the prelude to uncontrolled laughter, and John quickly poured some more chianti into her glass.

'Pretend to choke,' he said, 'then they won't notice. You know what it is—they're criminals doing the sights of Europe, changing sex at each stop. Twin sisters here on Torcello. Twin brothers tomorrow in Venice, or even tonight, parading arm-in-arm across the Piazza San Marco. Just a matter of switching clothes and wigs.'

'Jewel thieves or murderers?' asked Laura.

'Oh, murderers, definitely. But why, I ask myself, have they picked on me?'

The waiter made a diversion by bringing coffee and bearing away the fruit, which gave Laura time to banish hysteria and regain control.

'I can't think,' she said, 'why we didn't notice them when we arrived. They stand out to high heaven. One couldn't fail.'

'That gang of Americans masked them,' said John, 'and the bearded man with a monocle who looked like a spy. It wasn't until they all went just now that I saw the twins. Oh God, the one with the shock of white hair has got her eye on me again.'

Laura took the powder compact from her bag and held it in front of her face, the mirror acting as a reflector.

‘I think it’s me they’re looking at, not you,’ she said. ‘Thank heaven I left my pearls with the manager at the hotel.’ She paused, dabbing the sides of her nose with powder. ‘The thing is,’ she said after a moment, ‘we’ve got them wrong. They’re neither murderers nor thieves. They’re a couple of pathetic old retired schoolmistresses on holiday, who’ve saved up all their lives to visit Venice. They come from some place with a name like Walabanga in Australia. And they’re called Tilly and Tiny.’

Her voice, for the first time since they had come away, took on the old bubbling quality he loved, and the worried frown between her brows had vanished. At last, he thought, at last she’s beginning to get over it. If I can keep this going, if we can pick up the familiar routine of jokes shared on holiday and at home, the ridiculous fantasies about people at other tables, or staying in the hotel, or wandering in art galleries and churches, then everything will fall into place, life will become as it was before, the wound will heal, she will forget.

‘You know,’ said Laura, ‘that really was a very good lunch. I did enjoy it.’

Thank God, he thought, thank God.... Then he leant forward, speaking low in a conspirator’s whisper. ‘One of them is going to the loo,’ he said. Do you suppose he, or she, is going to change her wig?’

‘Don’t say anything,’ Laura murmured. ‘I’ll follow her and find out. She may have a suitcase tucked away there, and she’s going to switch clothes.’

She began to hum under her breath, the signal, to her husband, of content. The ghost was temporarily laid, and all because of the familiar holiday game, abandoned too long, and now, through mere chance, blissfully recaptured.

‘Is she on her way?’ asked Laura.

‘About to pass our table now,’ he told her.

Seen on her own, the woman was not so remarkable. Tall, angular, aquiline features, with the close-cropped hair which was fashionably called an Eton crop, he seemed to remember, in his mother’s day, and about her person the stamp of that particular generation. She would be in her middle sixties, he supposed, the masculine shirt with collar and tie, sports jacket, grey tweed skirt coming to mid-calf. Grey stockings and laced black shoes. He had seen the type on golf-courses and at dog-shows—invariably showing not sporting breeds but pugs—and if you came across them at a party in somebody’s house they were quicker on the draw with a cigarette-lighter than he was himself, a mere male, with pocket-matches. The

general belief that they kept house with a more feminine, fluffy companion was not always true. Frequently they boasted, and adored, a golfing husband. No, the striking point about this particular individual was that there were two of them. Identical twins cast in the same mould. The only difference was that the other one had whiter hair.

‘Supposing,’ murmured Laura, ‘when I find myself in the toilette beside her she starts to strip?’

‘Depends on what is revealed,’ John answered. ‘If she’s hermaphrodite, make a bolt for it. She might have a hypodermic syringe concealed and want to knock you out before you reached the door.’

Laura sucked in her cheeks once more and began to shake. Then, squaring her shoulders, she rose to her feet. ‘I simply must not laugh,’ she said, ‘and whatever you do, don’t look at me when I come back, especially if we come out together.’ She picked up her bag and strolled self-consciously away from the table in pursuit of her prey.

John poured the dregs of the chianti into his glass and lit a cigarette. The sun blazed down upon the little garden of the restaurant. The Americans had left, and the monocled man, and the family party at the far end. All was peace. The identical twin was sitting back in her chair with her eyes closed. Thank heaven, he thought, for this moment at any rate, when relaxation was possible, and Laura had been launched upon her foolish, harmless game. The holiday could yet turn into the cure she needed, blotting out, if only temporarily, the numb despair that had seized her since the child died.

‘She’ll get over it,’ the doctor said. ‘They all get over it, in time. And you have the boy.’

‘I know,’ John had said, ‘but the girl meant everything. She always did, right from the start, I don’t know why. I suppose it was the difference in age. A boy of school age, and a tough one at that, is someone in his own right. Not a baby of five. Laura literally adored her. Johnnie and I were nowhere.’

‘Give her time,’ repeated the doctor, ‘give her time. And anyway, you’re both young still. There’ll be others. Another daughter.’

So easy to talk.... How replace the life of a loved lost child with a dream? He knew Laura too well. Another child, another girl, would have her own qualities, a separate identity, she might even induce hostility because of this very fact. A usurper in the cradle, in the cot, that had been Christine’s. A chubby, flaxen replica of Johnnie, not the little waxen dark-haired sprite that had gone.

He looked up, over his glass of wine, and the woman was staring at him again. It was not the

casual, idle glance of someone at a nearby table, waiting for her companion to return, but something deeper, more intent, the prominent, light blue eyes oddly penetrating, giving him a sudden feeling of discomfort. Damn the woman! All right, bloody stare, if you must. Two can play at that game. He blew a cloud of cigarette smoke into the air and smiled at her, he hoped offensively. She did not register. The blue eyes continued to hold his, so that he was obliged to look away himself, extinguish his cigarette, glance over his shoulder for the waiter and call for the bill. Settling for this, and fumbling with the change, with a few casual remarks about the excellence of the meal, brought composure, but a prickly feeling on his scalp remained, and an odd sensation of unease. Then it went, as abruptly as it had started, and stealing a furtive glance at the other table he saw that her eyes were closed again, and she was sleeping, or dozing, as she had done before. The waiter disappeared. All was still.

Laura, he thought, glancing at his watch, is being a hell of a time. Ten minutes at least. Something to tease her about, anyway. He began to plan the form the joke would take. How the old dolly had stripped to her smalls, suggesting that Laura should do likewise. And then the manager had burst in upon them both, exclaiming in horror, the reputation of the restaurant damaged, the hint that unpleasant consequences might follow unless ... The whole exercise turning out to be a plant, an exercise in blackmail. He and Laura and the twins taken in a police launch back to Venice for questioning. Quarter of an hour.... Oh, come on, come on....

There was a crunch of feet on the gravel. Laura's twin walked slowly past, alone. She crossed over to her table and stood there a moment, her tall, angular figure interposing itself between John and her sister. She was saying something, but he couldn't catch the words. What was the accent, though—Scottish? Then she bent, offering an arm to the seated twin, and they moved away together across the garden to the break in the little hedge beyond, the twin who had stared at John leaning on her sister's arm. Here was the difference again. She was not quite so tall, and she stooped more—perhaps she was arthritic. They disappeared out of sight, and John, becoming impatient, got up and was about to walk back into the hotel when Laura emerged.

'Well, I must say, you took your time,' he began, and then stopped, because of the expression on her face.

'What's the matter, what's happened?' he asked.

He could tell at once there was something wrong. Almost as if she were in a state of shock. She blundered towards the table he had just vacated and sat down. He drew up a chair beside her, taking her hand.

'Darling, what is it? Tell me— are you ill?'

She shook her head, and then turned and looked at him. The dazed expression he had noticed at first had given way to one of dawning confidence, almost of exaltation.

‘It’s quite wonderful,’ she said slowly, ‘the most wonderful thing that could possibly be. You see, she isn’t dead, she’s still with us. That’s why they kept staring at us, those two sisters. They could see Christine.’

Oh God, he thought. It’s what I’ve been dreading. She’s going off her head. What do I do? How do I cope?

‘Laura, sweet,’ he began, forcing a smile, ‘look, shall we go? I’ve paid the bill, we can go and look at the cathedral and stroll around, and then it will be time to take off in that launch again for Venice.’

She wasn’t listening, or at any rate the words didn’t penetrate.

‘John, love,’ she said, ‘I’ve got to tell you what happened. I followed her, as we planned, into the toilette place. She was combing her hair and I went into the loo, and then came out and washed my hands in the basin. She was washing hers in the next basin. Suddenly she turned and said to me, in a strong Scots accent, ‘Don’t be unhappy any more. My sister has seen your little girl. She was sitting between you and your husband, laughing.’ Darling, I thought I was going to faint. I nearly did. Luckily, there was a chair, and I sat down, and the woman bent over me and patted my head. I’m not sure of her exact words, but she said something about the moment of truth and joy being as sharp as a sword, but not to be afraid, all was well, but the sister’s vision had been so strong they knew I had to be told, and that Christine wanted it. Oh, John, don’t look like that. I swear I’m not making it up, this is what she told me, it’s all true.’

The desperate urgency in her voice made his heart sicken. He had to play along with her, agree, soothe, do anything to bring back some sense of calm.

‘Laura, darling, of course I believe you,’ he said, ‘only it’s a sort of shock, and I’m upset because you’re upset....’

‘But I’m not upset,’ she interrupted. ‘I’m happy, so happy that I can’t put the feeling into words. You know what it’s been like all these weeks, at home and everywhere we’ve been on holiday, though I tried to hide it from you. Now it’s lifted, because I know, I just know, that the woman was right. Oh Lord, how awful of me, but I’ve forgotten their name—she did tell me. You see, the thing is that she’s a retired doctor, they come from Edinburgh, and the one who saw Christine went blind a few years ago. Although she’s studied the occult all her life and been very psychic, it’s only since going blind that she has really seen things, like a medium. They’ve had the most wonderful experiences. But to describe Christine as the

blind one did to her sister, even down to the little blue-and-white dress with the puff sleeves that she wore at her birthday party, and to say she was smiling happily.... Oh, darling, it's made me so happy I think I'm going to cry.'

No hysteria. Nothing wild. She took a tissue from her bag and blew her nose, smiling at him. 'I'm all right, you see, you don't have to worry. Neither of us need worry about anything any more. Give me a cigarette.'

He took one from his packet and lighted it for her. She sounded normal, herself again. She wasn't trembling. And if this sudden belief was going to keep her happy he couldn't possibly begrudge it. But ... but ... he wished, all the same, it hadn't happened. There was something uncanny about thought-reading, about telepathy. Scientists couldn't account for it, nobody could, and this is what must have happened just now between Laura and the sisters. So the one who had been staring at him was blind. That accounted for the fixed gaze. Which somehow was unpleasant in itself, creepy. Oh hell, he thought, I wish we hadn't come here for lunch. Just chance, a flick of a coin between this, Torcello, and driving to Padua, and we had to choose Torcello.

'You didn't arrange to meet them again or anything, did you?' he asked, trying to sound casual.

'No, darling, why should I?' Laura answered. 'I mean, there was nothing more they could tell me. The sister had her wonderful vision, and that was that. Anyway, they're moving on. Funnily enough, it's rather like our original game. They are going round the world before returning to Scotland. Only I said Australia, didn't I? The old dears Anything less like murderers and jewel thieves.'

She had quite recovered. She stood up and looked about her. 'Come on,' she said. 'Having come to Torcello we must see the cathedral.'

They made their way from the restaurant across the open piazza, where the stalls had been set up with scarves and trinkets and postcards, and so along the path to the cathedral. One of the ferry-boats had just decanted a crowd of sightseers, many of whom had already found their way into Santa Maria Assunta. Laura, undaunted, asked her husband for the guidebook, and, as had always been her custom in happier days, started to walk slowly through the cathedral, studying mosaics, columns, panels from left to right, while John, less interested, because of his concern at what had just happened, followed close behind, keeping a weather eye alert for the twin sisters. There was no sign of them. Perhaps they had gone into the church of Santa Fosca close by. A sudden encounter would be embarrassing, quite apart from the effect it might have upon Laura. But the anonymous, shuffling tourists, intent upon culture, could not harm her, although from his own point of view they made artistic appreciation impossible. He could not concentrate, the cold clear

beauty of what he saw left him untouched, and when Laura touched his sleeve, pointing to the mosaic of the Virgin and Child standing above the frieze of the Apostles, he nodded in sympathy yet saw nothing, the long, sad face of the Virgin infinitely remote, and turning on sudden impulse stared back over the heads of the tourists towards the door, where frescoes of the blessed and the damned gave themselves to judgement.

The twins were standing there, the blind one still holding on to her sister's arm, her sightless eyes fixed firmly upon him. He felt himself held, unable to move, and an impending sense of doom, of tragedy, came upon him. His whole being sagged, as it were, in apathy, and he thought, 'This is the end, there is no escape, no future.' Then both sisters turned and went out of the cathedral and the sensation vanished, leaving indignation in its wake, and rising anger. How dare those two old fools practise their mediumistic tricks on him? It was fraudulent, unhealthy; this was probably the way they lived, touring the world making everyone they met uncomfortable. Give them half a chance and they would have got money out of Laura—anything.

He felt her tugging at his sleeve again. 'Isn't she beautiful? So happy, so serene.'

'Who? What?' he asked.

'The Madonna,' she answered. 'She has a magic quality. It goes right through to one. Don't you feel it too?'

'I suppose so. I don't know. There are too many people around.'

She looked up at him, astonished. 'What's that got to do with it? How funny you are. Well, all right, let's get away from them. I want to buy some postcards anyway.'

Disappointed, she sensed his lack of interest, and began to thread her way through the crowd of tourists to the door.

'Come on,' he said abruptly, once they were outside, 'there's plenty of time for postcards, let's explore a bit,' and he struck off from the path, which would have taken them back to the centre where the little houses were, and the stalls, and the drifting crowd of people, to a narrow way amongst uncultivated ground, beyond which he could see a sort of cutting or canal. The sight of water, limpid, pale, was a soothing contrast to the fierce sun above their heads.

'I don't think this leads anywhere much,' said Laura. 'It's a bit muddy, too, one can't sit. Besides, there are more things the guidebook says we ought to see.'

'Oh, forget the book,' he said impatiently, and, pulling her down beside him on the bank

above the cutting, put his arms round her.

‘It’s the wrong time of day for sight-seeing. Look, there’s a rat swimming there the other side.’

He picked up a stone and threw it in the water, and the animal sank, or somehow disappeared, and nothing was left but bubbles.

‘Don’t,’ said Laura. ‘It’s cruel, poor thing,’ and then suddenly, putting her hand on his knee, ‘Do you think Christine is sitting here beside us?’

He did not answer at once. What was there to say? Would it be like this forever?

‘I expect so,’ he said slowly, ‘if you feel she is.’

The point was, remembering Christine before the onset of the fatal meningitis, she would have been running along the bank excitedly, throwing off her shoes, wanting to paddle, giving Laura a fit of apprehension. ‘Sweetheart, take care, come back ...’

‘The woman said she was looking so happy, sitting beside us, smiling,’ said Laura. She got up, brushing her dress, her mood changed to restlessness. ‘Come on, let’s go back,’ she said.

He followed her with a sinking heart. He knew she did not really want to buy postcards or see what remained to be seen; she wanted to go in search of the women again, not necessarily to talk, just to be near them. When they came to the open place by the stalls he noticed that the crowd of tourists had thinned, there were only a few stragglers left, and the sisters were not amongst them. They must have joined the main body who had come to Torcello by the ferry-service. A wave of relief seized him.

‘Look, there’s a mass of postcards at the second stall,’ he said quickly, ‘and some eye-catching head scarves. Let me buy you a head scarf.’

‘Darling, I’ve so many!’ she protested. ‘Don’t waste your lire.’

‘It isn’t a waste. I’m in a buying mood. What about a basket? You know we never have enough baskets. Or some lace. How about lace?’

She allowed herself, laughing, to be dragged to the stall. While he rumpled through the goods spread out before them. and chatted up the smiling woman who was selling her wares, his ferociously bad Italian making her smile the more, he knew it would give the body of tourists more time to walk to the landing stage and catch the ferry-service, and the

twin sisters would be out of sight and out of their life.

‘Never,’ said Laura, some twenty minutes later, ‘has so much junk been piled into so small a basket,’ her bubbling laugh reassuring him that all was well, he needn’t worry any more, the evil hour had passed. The launch from the Cipriani that had brought them from Venice was waiting by the landing-stage. The passengers who had arrived with them, the Americans, the man with the monocle, were already assembled. Earlier, before setting out, he had thought the price for lunch and transport, there and back, decidedly steep. Now he grudged none of it, except that the outing to Torcello itself had been one of the major errors of this particular holiday in Venice. They stepped down into the launch, finding a place in the open, and the boat chugged away down the canal and into the lagoon. The ordinary ferry had gone before, steaming towards Murano, while their own craft headed past San Francesco del Deserto and so back direct to Venice.

He put his arm around her once more, holding her close, and this time she responded, smiling up at him, her head on his shoulder.

‘It’s been a lovely day,’ she said. ‘I shall never forget it, never. You know, darling, now at last I can begin to enjoy our holiday.’

He wanted to shout with relief. It’s going to be all right, he decided, let her believe what she likes, it doesn’t matter, it makes her happy. The beauty of Venice rose before them, sharply outlined against the glowing sky, and there was still so much to see, wandering there together, that might now be perfect because of her change of mood, the shadow having lifted, and aloud he began to discuss the evening to come, where they would dine– not the restaurant they usually went to, near the Fenice theatre, but somewhere different, somewhere new.

‘Yes, but it must be cheap,’ she said, falling in with his mood, ‘because we’ve already spent so much today.’

Their hotel by the Grand Canal had a welcoming, comforting air. The clerk smiled as he handed over their key. The bedroom was familiar, like home, with Laura’s things arranged neatly on the dressing-table, but with it the little festive atmosphere of strangeness, of excitement, that only a holiday bedroom brings. This is ours for the moment, but no more. While we are in it we bring it life. When we have gone it no longer exists, it fades into anonymity. He turned on both taps in the bathroom, the water gushing into the bath, the steam rising. ‘Now,’ he thought afterwards, ‘now at last is the moment to make love,’ and he went back into the bedroom, and she understood, and opened her arms and smiled. Such blessed relief after all those weeks of restraint.

‘The thing is,’ she said later, fixing her ear-rings before the looking-glass, ‘I’m not really

terribly hungry. Shall we just be dull and eat in the dining-room here?’

‘God, no!’ he exclaimed. ‘With all those rather dreary couple at the other tables? I’m ravenous. I’m also gay. I want to get rather sloshed.’

‘Not bright lights and music, surely?’

‘No, no ... some small, dark, intimate cave, rather sinister, full of lovers with other people’s wives.’

‘H’m,’ sniffed Laura, ‘we all know what that means. You’ll spot some Italian lovely of sixteen and smirk at her through dinner, while I’m stuck high and dry with a beastly man’s broad back.’

They went out laughing into the warm soft night, and the magic was about them everywhere. ‘Let’s walk,’ he said, ‘let’s walk and work up an appetite for our gigantic meal,’ and inevitably they found themselves by the Molo and the lapping gondolas dancing upon the water, the lights everywhere blending with the darkness. There were other couples strolling for the same sake of aimless enjoyment, backwards, forwards, purposeless, and the inevitable sailors in groups, noisy, gesticulating, and dark-eyed girls whispering, clicking on high heels.

‘The trouble is,’ said Laura, ‘walking in Venice becomes compulsive once you start. Just over the next bridge, you say, and then the next one beckons. I’m sure there are no restaurants down here, we’re almost at those public gardens where they hold the Biennale. Let’s turn back. I know there’s a restaurant somewhere near the church of San Zaccaria, there’s a little alley-way leading to it.’

‘Tell you what,’ said John, ‘if we go down here by the Arsenal, and cross that bridge at the end and head left, we’ll come upon San Zaccaria from the other side. We did it the other morning.’

‘Yes, but it was daylight then. We may lose our way, it’s not very well lit.’

‘Don’t fuss. I have an instinct for these things.’

They turned down the Fondamenta dell’Arsenale and crossed the little bridge short of the Arsenal itself, and so on past the church of San Martino. There were two canals ahead, one bearing right, the other left, with narrow streets beside them. John hesitated. Which one was it they had walked beside the day before?

‘You see,’ protested Laura, ‘we shall be lost, just as I said.’ ‘Nonsense,’ replied John firmly.

‘It’s the left-hand one, I remember the little bridge.’

The canal was narrow, the houses on either side seemed to close in upon it, and in the daytime, with the sun’s reflection on the water and the windows of the houses open, bedding upon the balconies, a canary singing in a cage, there had been an impression of warmth, of secluded shelter. Now, almost in darkness, the windows of the houses shuttered, the water dank, the scene appeared altogether different, neglected, poor, and the long narrow boats moored to the slippery steps of cellar entrances looked like coffins.

‘I swear I don’t remember this bridge,’ said Laura, pausing, and holding on to the rail, ‘and I don’t like the look of that alleyway beyond.’

‘There’s a lamp halfway up,’ John told her. ‘I know exactly where we are, not far from the Greek quarter.’

They crossed the bridge, and were about to plunge into the alley-way when they heard the cry. It came, surely, from one of the houses on the opposite side, but which one it was impossible to say. With the shutters closed each one of them seemed dead. They turned, and stared in the direction from which the sound had come.

‘What was it?’ whispered Laura.

‘Some drunk or other,’ said John briefly. ‘Come on.’

Less like a drunk than someone being strangled, and the choking cry suppressed as the grip held firm.

‘We ought to call the police,’ said Laura.

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake,’ said John. Where did she think she was—Piccadilly?

‘Well, I’m off, it’s sinister,’ she replied, and began to hurry away up the twisting alley-way. John hesitated, his eye caught by a small figure which suddenly crept from a cellar entrance below one of the opposite houses, and then jumped into a narrow boat below. It was a child, a little girl she couldn’t have been more than five or six—wearing a short coat over her minute skirt, a pixie hood covering her head. There were four boats moored, line upon line, and she proceeded to jump from one to the other with surprising agility, intent, it would seem, upon escape. Once her foot slipped and he caught his breath, for she was within a few feet of the water, losing balance; then she recovered, and hopped on to the furthest boat. Bending, she tugged at the rope, which had the effect of swinging the boat’s after-end across the canal, almost touching the opposite side and another cellar entrance, about thirty feet from the spot where John stood watching her. Then the child jumped again, landing upon

the cellar steps, and vanished into the house, the boat swinging back into mid-canal behind her. The whole episode could not have taken more than four minutes. Then he heard the quick patter of feet. Laura had returned. She had seen none of it, for which he felt unspeakably thankful. The sight of a child, a little girl, in what must have been near danger, her fear that the scene he had just witnessed was in some way a sequel to the alarming cry, might have had a disastrous effect on her overwrought nerves.

‘What are you doing?’ she called. ‘I daren’t go on without you. The wretched alley branches in two directions.’

‘Sorry,’ he told her. ‘I’m coming.’

He took her arm and they walked briskly along the alley, John with an apparent confidence he did not possess.

‘There were no more cries, were there?’ she asked.

‘No,’ he said, ‘no, nothing. I tell you, it was some drunk.’

The alley led to a deserted campo behind a church, not a church he knew, and he led the way across, along another street and over a further bridge.

‘Wait a minute,’ he said. ‘I think we take this right-hand turning. It will lead us into the Greek quarter—the church of San Georgio is somewhere over there.’

She did not answer. She was beginning to lose faith. The place was like a maze. They might circle round and round forever, and then find themselves back again, near the bridge where they had heard the cry. Doggedly he led her on, and then surprisingly, with relief, he saw people walking in the lighted street ahead, there was a spire of a church, the surroundings became familiar.

‘There, I told you,’ he said. ‘That’s San Zaccaria, we’ve found it all right. Your restaurant can’t be far away.’

And anyway, there would be other restaurants, somewhere to eat, at least here was the cheering glitter of lights, of movement, canals beside which people walked, the atmosphere of tourism. The letters *Ristorante*, in blue lights, shone like a beacon down a left-hand alley.

‘Is this your place?’ he asked.

‘God knows,’ she said. ‘Who cares? Let’s feed there anyway.’

And so into the sudden blast of heated air and hum of voices, the smell of pasta, wine, waiters, jostling customers, laughter. For two? This way, please.' Why, he thought, was one's British nationality always so obvious? A cramped little table and an enormous menu scribbled in an indecipherable mauve biro, with the waiter hovering, expecting the order forthwith.

'Two very large camparis, with soda,' John said. 'Then we'll study the menu.'

He was not going to be rushed. He handed the bill of fare to Laura and looked about him. Mostly Italians—that meant the food would be good. Then he saw them. At the opposite side of the room. The twin sisters. They must have come into the restaurant hard upon Laura's and his own arrival, for they were only now sitting down, shedding their coats, the waiter hovering beside the table. John was seized with the irrational thought that this was no coincidence. The sisters had noticed them both, in the street outside, and had followed them in. Why, in the name of hell, should they have picked on this particular spot, in the whole of Venice, unless ... unless Laura herself, at Torcello, had suggested a further encounter, or the sister had suggested it to her? A small restaurant near the church of San Zaccaria, we go there sometimes for dinner. It was Laura, before the walk, who had mentioned San Zaccaria....

She was still intent upon the menu, she had not seen the sisters, but any moment now she would have chosen what she wanted to eat, and then she would raise her head and look across the room. If only the drinks would come. If only the waiter would bring the drinks, it would give Laura something to do.

'You know, I was thinking,' he said quickly, 'we really ought to go to the garage tomorrow and get the car, and do that drive to Padua. We could lunch in Padua, see the cathedral and touch St Antony's tomb and look at the Giotto frescoes, and come back by way of those various villas along the Brenta that the guidebook cracks up.'

It was no use, though. She was looking up, across the restaurant, and she gave a little gasp of surprise. It was genuine. He could swear it was genuine.

'Look,' she said, 'how extraordinary! How really amazing!' 'What?' he said sharply.

'Why, there they are. My wonderful old twins. They've seen us, what's more. They're staring this way.' She waved her hand, radiant, delighted. The sister she had spoken to at Torcello bowed and smiled. False old bitch, he thought. I know they followed us.

'Oh, darling, I must go and speak to them,' she said impulsively, 'just to tell them how happy I've been all day, thanks to them.'

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake!’ he said. ‘Look, here are the drinks. And we haven’t ordered yet. Surely you can wait until later, until we’ve eaten?’

‘I won’t be a moment,’ she said, ‘and anyway I want scampi, nothing first. I told you I wasn’t hungry.’

She got up, and, brushing past the waiter with the drinks, crossed the room. She might have been greeting the loved friends of years. He watched her bend over the table and shake them both by the hand, and because there was a vacant chair at their table she drew it up and sat down, talking, smiling. Nor did the sisters seem surprised, at least not the one she knew, who nodded and talked back, while the blind sister remained impassive.

‘All right,’ thought John savagely, ‘then I will get sloshed,’ and he proceeded to down his campari and soda and order another, while he pointed out something quite unintelligible on the menu as his own choice, but remembered scampi for Laura. ‘And a bottle of Soave,’ he added, ‘with ice.’

The evening was ruined anyway. What was to have been an intimate, happy celebration would now be heavy-laden with spiritualistic visions, poor little dead Christine sharing the table with them, which was so damned stupid when in earthly life she would have been tucked up hours ago in bed. The bitter taste of the campari suited his mood of sudden self-pity, and all the while he watched the group at the table in the opposite corner, Laura apparently listening while the more active sister held forth and the blind one sat silent, her formidable sightless eyes turned in his direction.

‘She’s phoney,’ he thought, ‘she’s not blind at all. They’re both of them frauds, and they could be males in drag after all, just as we pretended at Torcello, and they’re after Laura.’

He began on his second campari and soda. The two drinks, taken on an empty stomach, had an instant effect. Vision became blurred. And still Laura went on sitting at the other table, putting in a question now and again, while the active sister talked. The waiter appeared with the scampi, and a companion beside him to serve John’s own order, which was totally unrecognisable, heaped with a livid sauce.

‘The signora does not come?’ enquired the first waiter, and John shook his head grimly, pointing an unsteady finger across the room.

‘Tell the signora,’ he said carefully, ‘her scampi will get cold.’

He stared down at the offering placed before him, and prodded it delicately with a fork. The pallid sauce dissolved, revealing two enormous slices, rounds, of what appeared to be boiled

pork, bedecked with garlic. He forked a portion to his mouth and chewed, and yes, it was pork, steamy, rich, the spicy sauce having turned it curiously sweet. He laid down his fork, pushing the plate away, and became aware of Laura, returning across the room and sitting beside him. She did not say anything, which was just as well, he thought, because he was too near nausea to answer. It wasn't just the drink, but reaction from the whole nightmare day. She began to eat her scampi, still not uttering. She did not seem to notice he was not eating. The waiter, hovering at his elbow, anxious, seemed aware that John's choice was somehow an error, and discreetly removed the plate. 'Bring me a green salad,' murmured John, and even then Laura did not register surprise, or, as she might have done in more normal circumstances, accuse him of having had too much to drink. Finally, when she had finished her scampi and was sipping her wine, which John had waved away, to nibble at his salad in small mouthfuls like a sick rabbit, she began to speak.

'Darling,' she said, 'I know you won't believe it, and it's rather frightening in a way, but after they left the restaurant in Torcello the sisters went to the cathedral, as we did, although we didn't see them in that crowd, and the blind one had another vision. She said Christine was trying to tell her something about us, that we should be in danger if we stayed in Venice. Christine wanted us to go away as soon as possible.'

So that's it, he thought. They think they can run our lives for us. This is to be our problem from henceforth. Do we eat? Do we get up? Do we go to bed? We must get in touch with the twin sisters. They will direct us.

'Well?' she said. 'Why don't you say something?'

'Because,' he answered, 'you are perfectly right, I don't believe it. Quite frankly, I judge your old sisters as being a couple of freaks, if nothing else. They're obviously unbalanced, and I'm sorry if this hurts you, but the fact is they've found a sucker in you.'

'You're being unfair,' said Laura. 'They are genuine, I know it. I just know it. They were completely sincere in what they said.'

'All right. Granted. They're sincere. But that doesn't make them well-balanced. Honestly, darling, you meet that old girl for ten minutes in a loo, she tells you she sees Christine sitting beside us—well, anyone with a gift for telepathy could read your unconscious mind in an instant—and then, pleased with her success, as any old psychic expert would be, she flings a further mood of ecstasy and wants to boot us out of Venice. Well, I'm sorry, but to hell with it.'

The room was no longer reeling. Anger had sobered him. If it would not put Laura to shame he would get up and cross to their table, and tell the old fools where they got off.

‘I knew you would take it like this,’ said Laura unhappily. ‘I told them you would. They said not to worry. As long as we left Venice tomorrow everything would come all right.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake,’ said John. He changed his mind, and poured himself a glass of wine.

‘After all,’ Laura went on, ‘we have really seen the cream of Venice. I don’t mind going on somewhere else. And if we stayed—I know it sounds silly, but I should have a nasty nagging sort of feeling inside me, and I should keep thinking of darling Christine being unhappy and trying to tell us to go.’

‘Right,’ said John with ominous calm, ‘that settles it. Go we will. I suggest we clear off to the hotel straight away and warn the reception we’re leaving in the morning. Have you had enough to eat?’

‘Oh dear,’ sighed Laura, ‘don’t take it like that. Look, why not come over and meet them, and then they can explain about the vision to you? Perhaps you would take it seriously then. Especially as you are the one it most concerns. Christine is more worried over you than me. And the extraordinary thing is that the blind sister says you’re psychic and don’t know it. You are somehow en rapport with the unknown, and I’m not.’

‘Well, that’s final,’ said John. ‘I’m psychic, am I? Fine. My psychic intuition tells me to get out of this restaurant now, at once, and we can decide what we do about leaving Venice when we are back at the hotel.’

He signalled to the waiter for the bill and they waited for it, not speaking to each other, Laura unhappy, fiddling with her bag, while John, glancing furtively at the twins’ table, noticed that they were tucking into plates piled high with spaghetti, in very un-psychic fashion. The bill disposed of, John pushed back his chair.

‘Right. Are you ready?’ he asked.

‘I’m going to say goodbye to them first,’ said Laura, her mouth set sulkily, reminding him instantly, with a pang, of their poor lost child.

‘Just as you like,’ he replied, and walked ahead of her out of the restaurant, without a backward glance.

The soft humidity of the evening, so pleasant to walk about in earlier, had turned to rain. The strolling tourists had melted away. One or two people hurried by under umbrellas. This is what the inhabitants who live here see, he thought. This is the true life. Empty streets by night, the dank stillness of a stagnant canal beneath shuttered houses. The rest is a bright facade put on for show, glittering by sunlight.

Laura joined him and they walked away together in silence, and emerging presently behind the ducal palace came out into the Piazza San Marco. The rain was heavy now, and they sought shelter with the few remaining stragglers under the colonnades. The orchestras had packed up for the evening. The tables were bare. Chairs had been turned upside down.

The experts are right, he thought, Venice is sinking. The whole city is slowly dying. One day the tourists will travel here by boat to peer down into the waters, and they will see pillars and columns and marble far, far beneath them, slime and mud uncovering for brief moments a lost underworld of stone. Their heels made a ringing sound on the pavement and the rain splashed from the gutterings above. A fine ending to an evening that had started with brave hope, with innocence.

When they came to their hotel Laura made straight for the lift, and John turned to the desk to ask the night-porter for the key. The man handed him a telegram at the same time, John stared at it a moment. Laura was already in the lift. Then he opened the envelope and read the message. It was from the headmaster of Johnnie's preparatory school.

Johnnie under observation suspected appendicitis in city hospital here.

No cause for alarm but surgeon thought wise advise you.

Charles Hill

He read the message twice, then walked slowly towards the lift where Laura was waiting for him. He gave her the telegram. 'This came when we were out,' he said. 'Not awfully good news.' He pressed the lift button as she read the telegram. The lift stopped at the second floor, and they got out.

'Well, this decides it, doesn't it?' she said. 'Here is the proof. We have to leave Venice because we're going home. It's Johnnie who's in danger, not us. This is what Christine was trying to tell the twins.'

The first thing John did the following morning was to put a call through to the headmaster at the preparatory school. Then he gave notice of their departure to the reception manager, and they packed while they waited for the call. Neither of them referred to the events of the preceding day, it was not necessary. John knew the arrival of the telegram and the foreboding of danger from the sisters was coincidence, nothing more, but it was pointless to start an argument about it. Laura was convinced otherwise, but intuitively she knew it was best to keep her feelings to herself. During breakfast they discussed ways and means of getting home. It should be possible to get themselves, and the car, on to the special car train that ran from Milan through to Calais, since it was early in the season. In any event, the

headmaster had said there was no urgency.

The call from England came while John was in the bathroom. Laura answered it. He came into the bedroom a few minutes later. She was still speaking, but he could tell from the expression in her eyes that she was anxious.

‘It’s Mrs Hill,’ she said. ‘Mr Hill is in class. She says they reported from the hospital that Johnnie had a restless night and the surgeon may have to operate, but he doesn’t want to unless it’s absolutely necessary. They’ve taken X-rays and the appendix is in a tricky position, it’s not awfully straightforward.’

‘Here, give it to me,’ he said.

The soothing but slightly guarded voice of the headmaster’s wife came down the receiver. ‘I’m so sorry this may spoil your plans,’ she said, ‘but both Charles and I felt you ought to be told, and that you might feel rather easier if you were on the spot. Johnnie is very plucky, but of course he has some fever. That isn’t unusual, the surgeon says, in the circumstances. Sometimes an appendix can get displaced, it appears, and this makes it more complicated. He’s going to decide about operating this evening.’

‘Yes, of course, we quite understand,’ said John.

‘Please do tell your wife not to worry too much,’ she went on. ‘The hospital is excellent, a very nice staff, and we have every confidence in the surgeon.’

‘Yes,’ said John, ‘yes,’ and then broke off because Laura was making gestures beside him.

‘If we can’t get the car on the train, I can fly,’ she said. ‘They’re sure to be able to find me a seat on a plane. Then at least one of us would be there this evening.’

He nodded agreement. ‘Thank you so much, Mrs Hill,’ he said, ‘we’ll manage to get back all right. Yes, I’m sure Johnnie is in good hands. Thank your husband for us. Goodbye.’

He replaced the receiver and looked round him at the tumbled beds, suitcases on the floor, tissue-paper strewn. Baskets, maps, books, coats, everything they had brought with them in the car. ‘Oh God,’ he said, ‘what a bloody mess. All this junk.’ The telephone rang again. It was the hall porter to say he had succeeded in booking a sleeper for them both, and a place for the car, on the following night.

‘Look,’ said Laura, who had seized the telephone, ‘could you book one seat on the midday plane from Venice to London today, for me? It’s imperative one of us gets home this evening. My husband could follow with the car tomorrow.’

‘Here, hang on,’ interrupted John. ‘No need for panic stations. Surely twenty-four hours wouldn’t make all that difference?’

Anxiety had drained the colour from her face. She turned to him, distraught.

‘It mightn’t to you, but it does to me,’ she said. ‘I’ve lost one child, I’m not going to lose another.’

‘All right, darling, all right ...’ He put his hand out to her but she brushed it off, impatiently, and continued giving directions to the porter. He turned back to his packing. No use saying anything. Better for it to be as she wished. They could, of course, both go by air, and then when all was well, and Johnnie better, he could come back and fetch the car, driving home through France as they had come. Rather a sweat, though, and the hell of an expense. Bad enough Laura going by air and himself with the car on the train from Milan.

‘We could, if you like, both fly,’ he began tentatively, explaining the sudden idea, but she would have none of it. ‘That really would be absurd,’ she said impatiently. ‘As long as I’m there this evening, and you follow by train, it’s all that matters. Besides, we shall need the car, going backwards and forwards to the hospital. And our luggage. We couldn’t go off and just leave all this here.’

No, he saw her point. A silly idea. It was only—well, he was as worried about Johnnie as she was, though he wasn’t going to say so.

‘I’m going downstairs to stand over the porter,’ said Laura. ‘They always make more effort if one is actually on the spot. Everything I want tonight is packed. I shall only need my overnight case. You can bring everything else in the car.’ She hadn’t been out of the bedroom five minutes before the telephone rang. It was Laura. ‘Darling,’ she said, ‘it couldn’t have worked out better. The porter has got me on a charter flight that leaves Venice in less than an hour. A special motor-launch takes the party direct from San Marco in about ten minutes. Some passenger on the charter flight cancelled. I shall be at Gatwick in less than four hours.’

‘I’ll be down right away,’ he told her.

He joined her by the reception desk. She no longer looked anxious and drawn, but full of purpose. She was on her way. He kept wishing they were going together. He couldn’t bear to stay on in Venice after she had gone, but the thought of driving to Milan, spending a dreary night in a hotel there alone, the endless dragging day which would follow, and the long hours in the train the next night, filled him with intolerable depression, quite apart from the anxiety about Johnnie. They walked along to the San Marco landing-stage, the Molo bright

and glittering after the rain, a little breeze blowing, the postcards and scarves and tourist souvenirs fluttering on the stalls, the tourists themselves out in force, strolling, contented, the happy day before them.

‘I’ll ring you tonight from Milan,’ he told her. ‘The Hills will give you a bed, I suppose. And if you’re at the hospital they’ll let me have the latest news. That must be your charter party. You’re welcome to them!’

The passengers descending from the landing-stage down into the waiting launch were carrying hand-luggage with Union Jack tags upon them. They were mostly middle-aged, with what appeared to be two Methodist ministers in charge. One of them advanced towards Laura, holding out his hand, showing a gleaming row of dentures when he smiled. ‘You must be the lady joining us for the homeward flight,’ he said. ‘Welcome aboard, and to the Union of Fellowship. We are all delighted to make your acquaintance. Sorry we hadn’t a seat for hubby too.’

Laura turned swiftly and kissed John, a tremor at the corner of her mouth betraying inward laughter. ‘Do you think they’ll break into hymns?’ she whispered. ‘Take care of yourself, hubby. Call me tonight.’

The pilot sounded a curious little toot upon his horn, and in a moment Laura had climbed down the steps into the launch and was standing amongst the crowd of passengers, waving her hand, her scarlet coat a gay patch of colour amongst the more sober suiting of her companions. The launch tooted again and moved away from the landing-stage, and he stood there watching it, a sense of immense loss filling his heart. Then he turned and walked away, back to the hotel, the bright day all about him desolate, unseen.

There was nothing, he thought, as he looked about him presently in the hotel bedroom, so melancholy as a vacated room, especially when the recent signs of occupation were still visible about him. Laura’s suitcases on the bed, a second coat she had left behind. Traces of powder on the dressing-table. A tissue, with a lipstick smear, thrown in the waste-paper basket. Even an old tooth-paste tube squeezed dry, lying on the glass shelf above the wash-basin. Sounds of the heedless traffic on the Grand Canal came as always from the open window, but Laura wasn’t there any more to listen to it, or to watch from the small balcony. The pleasure had gone. Feeling had gone.

John finished packing, and leaving all the baggage ready to be collected he went downstairs to pay the bill. The reception clerk was welcoming new arrivals. People were sitting on the terrace overlooking the Grand Canal reading newspapers, the pleasant day waiting to be planned.

John decided to have an early lunch, here on the hotel terrace, on familiar ground, and then

have the porter carry the baggage to one of the ferries that steamed direct between San Marco and the Porta Roma, where the car was garaged. The fiasco meal of the night before had left him empty, and he was ready for the trolley of hors d'oeuvres when they brought it to him, around midday. Even here, though, there was change. The head-waiter, their especial friend, was off-duty, and the table where they usually sat was occupied by new arrivals, a honeymoon couple, he told himself sourly, observing the gaiety, the smiles, while he had been shown to a small single table behind a tub of flowers.

'She's airborne now,' John thought, 'she's on her way,' and he tried to picture Laura seated between the Methodist ministers, telling them, no doubt, about Johnnie ill in hospital, and heaven knows what else besides. Well, the twin sisters anyway could rest in psychic peace. Their wishes would have been fulfilled.

Lunch over, there was no point in lingering with a cup of coffee on the terrace. His desire was to get away as soon as possible, fetch the car, and be en route for Milan. He made his farewells at the reception desk, and, escorted by a porter who had piled his baggage on to a wheeled trolley, made his way once more to the landing-stage of San Marco. As he stepped on to the steam-ferry, his luggage heaped beside him, a crowd of jostling people all about him, he had one momentary pang to be leaving Venice. When, if ever, he wondered, would they come again? Next year.... in three years.... Glimpsed first on honeymoon, nearly ten years ago, and then a second visit, en passant, before a cruise, and now this last abortive ten days that had ended so abruptly.

The water glittered in the sunshine, buildings shone, tourists in dark glasses paraded up and down the rapidly receding Molo, already the terrace of their hotel was out of sight as the ferry churned its way up the Grand Canal. So many impressions to seize and hold, familiar loved façades, balconies, windows, water lapping the cellar steps of decaying palaces, the little red house where d'Annunzio lived, with its garden our house, Laura called it, pretending it was theirs—and too soon the ferry would be turning left on the direct route to the Piazzale Roma, so missing the best of the Canal, the Rialto, the further palaces.

Another ferry was heading downstream to pass them, filled with passengers, and for a brief foolish moment he wished he could change places, be amongst the happy tourists bound for Venice and all he had left behind him. Then he saw her. Laura, in her scarlet coat, the twin sisters by her side, the active sister with her hand on Laura's arm, talking earnestly, and Laura herself, her hair blowing in the wind, gesticulating, on her face a look of distress. He stared, astounded, too astonished to shout, to wave, and anyway they would never have heard or seen him, for his own ferry had already passed and was heading in the opposite direction.

What the hell had happened? There must have been a hold-up with the charter flight and it had never taken off, but in that case why had Laura not telephoned him at the hotel? And

what were those damned sisters doing? Had she run into them at the airport? Was it coincidence? And why did she look so anxious? He could think of no explanation. Perhaps the flight had been cancelled. Laura, of course, would go straight to the hotel, expecting to find him there, intending, doubtless, to drive with him after all to Milan and take the train the following night. What a blasted mix-up. The only thing to do was to telephone the hotel immediately his ferry reached the Piazzale Roma and tell her to wait— he would return and fetch her. As for the damned interfering sisters, they could get stuffed.

The usual stampede ensued when the ferry arrived at the landing-stage. He had to find a porter to collect his baggage, and then wait while he discovered a telephone. The fiddling with change, the hunt for the number, delayed him still more. He succeeded at last in getting through, and luckily the reception clerk he knew was still at the desk.

‘Look, there’s been some frightful muddle,’ he began, and explained how Laura was even now on her way back to the hotel—he had seen her with two friends on one of the ferry-services. Would the reception clerk explain and tell her to wait? He would be back by the next available service to collect her. ‘In any event, detain her,’ he said. ‘I’ll be as quick as I can.’ The reception clerk understood perfectly, and John rang off.

Thank heaven Laura hadn’t turned up before he had put through his call, or they would have told her he was on his way to Milan. The porter was still waiting with the baggage, and, it seemed simplest to walk with him to the garage, hand everything over to the chap in charge of the office there and ask him to keep it for an hour, when he would be returning with his wife to pick up the car. Then he went back to the landing-station to await the next ferry to Venice. The minutes dragged, and he kept wondering all the time what had gone wrong at the airport and why in heaven’s name Laura hadn’t telephoned. No use conjecturing. She would tell him the whole story at the hotel. One thing was certain: he would not allow Laura and himself to be saddled with the sisters and become involved with their affairs. He could imagine Laura saying that they also had missed a flight, and could they have a lift to Milan?

Finally the ferry chugged alongside the landing-stage and he stepped aboard. What an anticlimax, thrashing back past the familiar sights to which he had bidden a nostalgic farewell such a short while ago! He didn’t even look about him this time, he was so intent on reaching his destination. In San Marco there were more people than ever, the afternoon crowds walking shoulder to shoulder, every one of them on pleasure bent.

He came to the hotel and pushed his way through the swing door, expecting to see Laura, and possibly the sisters, waiting in the lounge to the left of the entrance. She was not there. He went to the desk. The reception clerk he had spoken to on the telephone was standing there, talking to the manager.

‘Has my wife arrived?’ John asked.

‘No, sir, not yet.’

‘What an extraordinary thing. Are you sure?’

‘Absolutely certain, sir. I have been here ever since you telephoned me at a quarter to two. I have not left the desk.’

‘I just don’t understand it. She was on one of the vaporettos passing by the Accademia. She would have landed at San Marco about five minutes later and come on here.’

The clerk seemed nonplussed. ‘I don’t know what to say. The signora was with friends, did you say?’

‘Yes. Well, acquaintances. Two ladies we had met at Torcello yesterday. I was astonished to see her with them on the vaporetto, and of course I assumed that the flight had been cancelled, and she had somehow met up with them at the airport and decided to return here with them, to catch me before I left.’

Oh hell, what was Laura doing? It was after three. A matter of moments from San Marco landing-stage to the hotel.

‘Perhaps the signora went with her friends to their hotel instead. Do you know where they are staying?’

‘No,’ said John, ‘I haven’t the slightest idea. What’s more, I don’t even know the names of the two ladies. They were sisters, twins, in fact—looked exactly alike. But anyway, why go to their hotel and not here?’

The swing-door opened but it wasn’t Laura. Two people staying in the hotel.

The manager broke into the conversation. ‘I tell you what I will do,’ he said. ‘I will telephone the airport and check about the flight. Then at least we will get somewhere.’ He smiled apologetically. It was not usual for arrangements to go wrong.

‘Yes, do that,’ said John. ‘We may as well know what happened there.’

He lit a cigarette and began to pace up and down the entrance hall. What a bloody mix-up. And how unlike Laura, who knew he would be setting off for Milan directly after lunch—indeed, for all she knew he might have gone before. But surely, in that case, she would have telephoned at once, on arrival at the airport, had the flight been cancelled? The manager

was ages telephoning, he had to be put through on some other line, and his Italian was too rapid for John to follow the conversation. Finally he replaced the receiver.

‘It is more mysterious than ever, sir,’ he said. ‘The charter flight was not delayed, it took off on schedule with a full complement of passengers. As far as they could tell me, there was no hitch. The signora must simply have changed her mind.’ His smile was more apologetic than ever.

‘Changed her mind,’ John repeated. ‘But why on earth should she do that? She was so anxious to be home tonight.’

The manager shrugged. ‘You know how ladies can be, sir,’ he said. ‘Your wife may have thought that after all she would prefer to take the train to Milan with you. I do assure you, though, that the charter party was most respectable, and it was a Caravelle aircraft, perfectly safe.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said John impatiently, ‘I don’t blame your arrangements in the slightest. I just can’t understand what induced her to change her mind, unless it was meeting with these two ladies.’

The manager was silent. He could not think of anything to say. The reception clerk was equally concerned. ‘Is it possible,’ he ventured, ‘that you made a mistake, and it was not the signora that you saw on the vaporetto?’

‘Oh no,’ replied John, ‘it was my wife, I assure you. She was wearing her red coat, she was hatless, just as she left here. I saw her as plainly as I can see you. I would swear to it in a court of law.’

‘It is unfortunate,’ said the manager, ‘that we do not know the name of the two ladies, or the hotel where they were staying. You say you met these ladies at Torcello yesterday?’

‘Yes ... but only briefly. They weren’t staying there. At least, I am certain they were not. We saw them at dinner in Venice later, as it happens.’

‘Excuse me....’ Guests were arriving with luggage to check in, the clerk was obliged to attend to them. John turned in desperation to the manager. ‘Do you think it would be any good telephoning the hotel in Torcello in case the people there knew the name of the ladies, or where they were staying in Venice?’

‘We can try,’ replied the manager. ‘It is a small hope, but we can try.’

John resumed his anxious pacing, all the while watching the swing-door, hoping, praying,

that he would catch sight of the red coat and Laura would enter. Once again there followed what seemed an interminable telephone conversation between the manager and someone at the hotel in Torcello.

‘Tell them two sisters,’ said John, ‘two elderly ladies dressed in grey, both exactly alike. One lady was blind,’ he added. The manager nodded. He was obviously giving a detailed description. Yet when he hung up he shook his head. ‘The manager at Torcello says he remembers the two ladies well,’ he told John, ‘but they were only there for lunch. He never learnt their names.’

‘Well, that’s that. There’s nothing to do but wait.’

John lit his third cigarette and went out on to the terrace, to resume his pacing there. He stared out across the canal, searching the heads of the people on passing steamers, motor-boats, even drifting gondolas. The minutes ticked by on his watch, and there was no sign of Laura. A terrible foreboding nagged at him that somehow this was prearranged, that Laura had never intended to catch the aircraft, that last night in the restaurant she had made an assignation with the sisters. Oh God, he thought, that’s impossible, I’m going paranoiac.... Yet why, why? No, more likely the encounter at the airport was fortuitous, and for some incredible reason they had persuaded Laura not to board the aircraft, even prevented her from doing so, trotting out one of their psychic visions, that the aircraft would crash, that she must return with them to Venice. And Laura, in her sensitive state, felt they must be right, swallowed it all without question.

But granted all these possibilities, why had she not come to the hotel? What was she doing? Four o’clock, half-past four, the sun no longer dappling the water. He went back to the reception desk.

‘I just can’t hang around,’ he said. ‘Even if she does turn up, we shall never make Milan this evening. I might see her walking with these ladies, in the Piazza San Marco, anywhere. If she arrives while I’m out, will you explain?’

The clerk was full of concern. ‘Indeed, yes,’ he said ‘It is very worrying for you, sir. Would it perhaps be prudent if we booked you in here tonight?’

John gestured, helplessly. ‘Perhaps, yes, I don’t know. Maybe ...’

He went out of the swing-door and began to walk towards the Piazza San Marco. He looked into every shop up and down the colonnades, crossed the piazza a dozen times, threaded his way between the tables in front of Florian’s, in front of Quadri’s, knowing that Laura’s red coat and the distinctive appearance of the twin sisters could easily be spotted, even amongst this milling crowd, but there was no sign of them. He joined the crowd of shoppers in the

Merceria, shoulder to shoulder with idlers, thrusters, window-gazers, knowing instinctively that it was useless, they wouldn't be here. Why should Laura have deliberately missed her flight to return to Venice for such a purpose? And even if she had done so, for some reason beyond his imagining, she would surely have come first to the hotel to find him.

The only thing left to him was to try to track down the sisters. Their hotel could be anywhere amongst the hundreds of hotels and pensions scattered through Venice, or even across the other side at the Zattere, or further again on the Giudecca. These last possibilities seemed remote. More likely they were staying in a small hotel or pension somewhere near San Zaccaria handy to the restaurant where they had dined last night. The blind one would surely not go far afield in the evening. He had been a fool not to have thought of this before, and he turned back and walked quickly away from the brightly lighted shopping district towards the narrower, more cramped quarter where they had dined last evening. He found the restaurant without difficulty, but they were not yet open for dinner, and the waiter preparing tables was not the one who had served them. John asked to see the padrone, and the waiter disappeared to the back regions, returning after a moment or two with the somewhat dishevelled-looking proprietor in shirt-sleeves, caught in a slack moment, not in full tenue.

'I had dinner here last night,' John explained. 'There were two ladies sitting at that table there in the corner.' He pointed to it.

'You wish to book that table for this evening?' asked the proprietor.

'No,' said John. 'No, there were two ladies there last night, two sisters, due sorelle, twins, gemelle'—what was the right word for twins?—Do you remember? Two ladies, sorelle vecchie

'Ah; said the man, 'si, si, signore, la povera signorina.' He put his hands to his eyes to feign blindness. 'Yes, I remember.'

'Do you know their names?' asked John. 'Where they were staying? I am very anxious to trace them.'

The proprietor spread out his hands in a gesture of regret. 'I am ver' sorry, signore, I do not know the names of the signorine, they have been here once, twice, perhaps for dinner, they do not say where they were staying. Perhaps if you come again tonight they might be here? Would you like to book a table?'

He pointed around him, suggesting a whole choice of tables that might appeal to a prospective diner, but John shook his head.

‘Thank you, no. I may be dining elsewhere. I am sorry to have troubled you. If the signorine should come ...’ he paused, ‘possibly I may return later,’ he added. ‘I am not sure.’

The proprietor bowed, and walked with him to the entrance. ‘In Venice the whole world meets,’ he said smiling. ‘It is possible the signore will find his friends tonight. Arrivederci, signore.’

Friends? John walked out into the street. More likely kidnappers.... Anxiety had turned to fear, to panic. Something had gone terribly wrong. Those women had got hold of Laura, played upon her suggestibility, induced her to go with them, either to their hotel or elsewhere. Should he find the Consulate? Where was it? What would he say when he got there? He began walking without purpose, finding himself, as they had done the night before, in streets he did not know, and suddenly came upon a tall building with the word ‘Questura’ above it. This is it, he thought. I don’t care, something has happened, I’m going inside. There were a number of police in uniform coming and going, the place at any rate was active, and, addressing himself to one of them behind a glass partition, he asked if there was anyone who spoke English. The man pointed to a flight of stairs and John went up, entering a door on the right where he saw that another couple were sitting, waiting, and with relief he recognised them as fellow-countrymen, tourists, obviously a man and his wife, in some sort of predicament.

‘Come and sit down,’ said the man. ‘We’ve waited half-an-hour but they can’t be much longer. What a country! They wouldn’t leave us like this at home.’

John took the proffered cigarette and found a chair beside them.

‘What’s your trouble?’ he asked.

‘My wife had her handbag pinched in one of those shops in the Merceria,’ said the man. ‘She simply put it down one moment to look at something, and you’d hardly credit it, the next moment it had gone. I say it was a sneak thief, she insists it was the girl behind the counter. But who’s to say? These Ities are all alike. Anyway, I’m certain we shan’t get it back. What have you lost?’

‘Suitcase stolen,’ John lied rapidly. ‘Had some important papers in it.’

How could he say he had lost his wife? He couldn’t even begin ...

The man nodded in sympathy. ‘As I said, these Ities are all alike. Old Musso knew how to deal with them. Too many Communists around these days. The trouble is, they’re not going to bother with our troubles much, not with this murderer at large. They’re all out looking for him ‘

‘Murderer? What murderer?’ asked John.

‘Don’t tell me you’ve not heard about it?’ The man stared at him in surprise. ‘Venice has talked of nothing else. It’s been in all the papers, on the radio, and even in the English papers. A grizzly business. One woman found with her throat slit last week—a tourist too—and some old chap discovered with the same sort of knife wound this morning. They seem to think it must be a maniac, because there doesn’t seem to be any motive. Nasty thing to happen in Venice in the tourist season.’

‘My wife and I never bother with the newspapers when we’re on holiday,’ said John. ‘And we’re neither of us much given to gossip in the hotel.’

‘Very wise of you,’ laughed the man. ‘It might have spoilt your holiday, especially if your wife is nervous. Oh well, we’re off tomorrow anyway. Can’t say we mind, do we, dear?’ He turned to his wife. ‘Venice has gone downhill since we were here last. And now this loss of the handbag really is the limit.’

The door of the inner room opened, and a senior police officer asked John’s companion and his wife to pass through.

‘I bet we don’t get any satisfaction,’ murmured the tourist, winking at John, and he and his wife went into the inner room. The door closed behind them. John stubbed out his cigarette and lighted another. A strange feeling of unreality possessed him. He asked himself what he was doing here, what was the use of it? Laura was no longer in Venice but had disappeared, perhaps forever, with those diabolical sisters. She would never be traced. And just as the two of them had made up a fantastic story about the twins, when they first spotted them in Torcello, so, with nightmare logic, the fiction would have basis in fact; the women were in reality disguised crooks, men with criminal intent who lured unsuspecting persons to some appalling fate. They might even be the murderers for whom the police sought. Who would ever suspect two elderly women of respectable appearance, living quietly in some second-rate pension or hotel? He stubbed out his cigarette, unfinished.

‘This,’ he thought, ‘is really the start of paranoia. This is the way people go off their heads.’ He glanced at his watch. It was half-past six. Better pack this in, this futile quest here in police headquarters, and keep to the single link of sanity remaining. Return to the hotel, put a call through to the prep school in England, and ask about the latest news of Johnnie. He had not thought about poor Johnnie since sighting Laura on the vaporetto.

Too late, though. The inner door opened, the couple were ushered out.

‘Usual clap-trap,’ said the husband sotto voce to John. ‘They’ll do what they can. Not much

hope. So many foreigners in Venice, all of 'em thieves! The locals all above reproach. Wouldn't pay 'em to steal from customers. Well, I wish you better luck.'

He nodded, his wife smiled and bowed, and they had gone. John followed the police officer into the inner room.

Formalities began. Name, address, passport. Length of stay in Venice, etc., etc. Then the questions, and John, the sweat beginning to appear on his forehead, launched into his interminable story. The first encounter with the sisters, the meeting at the restaurant, Laura's state of suggestibility because of the death of their child, the telegram about Johnnie, the decision to take the chartered flight, her departure, and her sudden inexplicable return. When he had finished he felt as exhausted as if he had driven three hundred miles non-stop after a severe bout of 'flu. His interrogator spoke excellent English with a strong Italian accent.

'You say,' he began, 'that your wife was suffering the after-effects of shock. This had been noticeable during your stay here in Venice?'

'Well, yes,' John replied, 'she had really been quite ill. The holiday didn't seem to be doing her much good. It was only when she met these two women at Torcello yesterday that her mood changed. The strain seemed to have gone. She was ready, I suppose, to snatch at every straw, and this belief that our little girl was watching over her had somehow restored her to what appeared normality.'

'It would be natural,' said the police officer, 'in the circumstances. But no doubt the telegram last night was a further shock to you both?'

'Indeed, yes. That was the reason we decided to return home.'

'No argument between you? No difference of opinion?'

'None. We were in complete agreement. My one regret was that I could not go with my wife on this charter flight.'

The police officer nodded. 'It could well be that your wife had a sudden attack of amnesia, and meeting the two ladies served as a link, she clung to them for support. You have described them with great accuracy, and I think they should not be too difficult to trace. Meanwhile, I suggest you should return to your hotel, and we will get in touch with you as soon as we have news.'

At least, John thought, they believed his story. They did not consider him a crank who had made the whole thing up and was merely wasting their time.

‘You appreciate,’ he said, ‘I am extremely anxious. These women may have some criminal design upon my wife. One has heard of such things....’

The police officer smiled for the first time. ‘Please don’t concern yourself,’ he said. ‘I am sure there will be some satisfactory explanation.’

All very well, thought John, but in heaven’s name, what?

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘to have taken up so much of your time. Especially as I gather the police have their hands full hunting down a murderer who is still at large.’

He spoke deliberately. No harm in letting the fellow know that for all any of them could tell there might be some connection between Laura’s disappearance and this other hideous affair.

‘Ah, that,’ said the police officer, rising to his feet. ‘We hope to have the murderer under lock and key very soon.’

His tone of confidence was reassuring. Murderers, missing wives, lost handbags were all under control. They shook hands, and John was ushered out of the door and so downstairs. Perhaps, he thought, as he walked slowly back to the hotel, the fellow was right. Laura had suffered a sudden attack of amnesia, and the sisters happened to be at the airport and had brought her back to Venice, to their own hotel, because Laura couldn’t remember where she and John had been staying. Perhaps they were even now trying to track down his hotel. Anyway, he could do nothing more. The police had everything in hand, and, please God, would come up with the solution. All he wanted to do right now was to collapse upon a bed with a stiff whisky, and then put through a call to Johnnie’s school.

The page took him up in the lift to a modest room on the fourth floor at the rear of the hotel. Bare, impersonal, the shutters closed, with a smell of cooking wafting up from a courtyard down below.

‘Ask them to send me up a double whisky, will you?’ he said to the boy. ‘And a ginger-ale,’ and when he was alone he plunged his face under the cold tap in the wash-basin, relieved to find that the minute portion of visitor’s soap afforded some measure of comfort. He flung off his shoes, hung his coat over the back of a chair and threw himself down on the bed. Somebody’s radio was blasting forth an old popular song, now several seasons out-of-date, that had been one of Laura’s favourites a couple of years ago. ‘I love you, Baby ...’ He reached for the telephone, and asked the exchange to put through the call to England. Then he closed his eyes, and all the while the insistent voice persisted, ‘I love you, Baby ... I can’t get you out of my mind.’

Presently there was a tap at the door. It was the waiter with his drink. Too little ice, such meagre comfort, but what desperate need. He gulped it down without the ginger-ale, and in a few moments the ever-nagging pain was eased, numbed, bringing, if only momentarily, a sense of calm. The telephone rang, and now, he thought, bracing himself for ultimate disaster, the final shock, Johnnie probably dying, or already dead. In which case nothing remained. Let Venice be engulfed....

The exchange told him that the connection had been made, and in a moment he heard the voice of Mrs Hill at the other end of the line. They must have warned her that the call came from Venice, for she knew instantly who was speaking.

‘Hullo?’ she said. ‘Oh, I am so glad you rang. All is well. Johnnie has had his operation, the surgeon decided to do it at midday rather than wait, and it was completely successful. Johnnie is going to be all right. So you don’t have to worry any more, and will have a peaceful night.’

‘Thank God,’ he answered.

‘I know,’ she said, ‘we are all so relieved. Now I’ll get off the line and you can speak to your wife.’

John sat up on the bed, stunned. What the hell did she mean? Then he heard Laura’s voice, cool and clear.

‘Darling? Darling, are you there?’

He could not answer. He felt the hand holding the receiver go clammy cold with sweat. ‘I’m here,’ he whispered.

‘It’s not a very good line,’ she said, ‘but never mind. As Mrs Hill told you, all is well. Such a nice surgeon, and a very sweet Sister on Johnnie’s floor, and I really am happy about the way it’s turned out. I came straight down here after landing at Gatwick—the flight O.K., by the way, but such a funny crowd, it’ll make you hysterical when I tell you about them—and I went to the hospital, and Johnnie was coming round. Very dopey, of course, but so pleased to see me. And the Hills are being wonderful, I’ve got their spare-room, and it’s only a short taxi-drive into the town and the hospital. I shall go to bed as soon as we’ve had dinner, because I’m a bit fagged, what with the flight and the anxiety. How was the drive to Milan? And where are you staying?’

John did not recognise the voice that answered as his own. It was the automatic response of some computer.

‘I’m not in Milan,’ he said. ‘I’m still in Venice.’

‘Still in Venice? What on earth for? Wouldn’t the car start?’ can’t explain,’ he said. ‘There was a stupid sort of mix-up....’

He felt suddenly so exhausted that he nearly dropped the receiver, and, shame upon shame, he could feel tears pricking behind his eyes.

‘What sort of mix-up?’ Her voice was suspicious, almost hostile. ‘You weren’t in a crash?’

‘No ... no ... nothing like that.’

A moment’s silence, and then she said, ‘Your voice sounds very slurred. Don’t tell me you went and got pissed.’

Oh Christ ... If she only knew! He was probably going to pass out any moment, but not from the whisky.

‘I thought,’ he said slowly, ‘thought I saw you, in a vaporetto, with those two sisters.’

What was the point of going on? It was hopeless trying to explain.

‘How could you have seen me with the sisters?’ she said. ‘You knew I’d gone to the airport. Really, darling, you are an idiot. You seem to have got those two poor old dears on the brain. I hope you didn’t say anything to Mrs Hill just now.’

‘No.’

‘Well, what are you going to do? You’ll catch the train at Milan tomorrow, won’t you?’

‘Yes, of course,’ he told her.

‘I still don’t understand what kept you in Venice,’ she said. ‘It all sounds a bit odd to me. However ... thank God Johnnie is going to be all right and I’m here.’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘yes.’

He could hear the distant boom-boom sound of a gong from the headmaster’s hall.

‘You had better go,’ he said. ‘My regards to the Hills, and my love to Johnnie.’

‘Well, take care of yourself, darling, and for goodness’ sake don’t miss the train tomorrow, and drive carefully.’

The telephone clicked and she had gone. He poured the remaining drop of whisky into his empty glass, and sousing it with ginger-ale drank it down at a gulp. He got up, and crossing the room threw open the shutters and leant out of the window. He felt light-headed. His sense of relief, enormous, overwhelming, was somehow tempered with a curious feeling of unreality, almost as though the voice speaking from England had not been Laura’s after all but a fake, and she was still in Venice, hidden in some furtive pension with the two sisters.

The point was, he had seen all three of them on the vaporetto. It was not another woman in a red coat. The women had been there, with Laura. So what was the explanation? That he was going of his head? Or something more sinister? The sisters, possessing psychic powers of formidable strength, had seen him as their two ferries had passed, and in some inexplicable fashion had made him believe Laura was with them. But why, and to what end? No, it didn’t make sense. The only explanation was that he had been mistaken, the whole episode an hallucination. In which case he needed psychoanalysis, just as Johnnie had needed a surgeon.

And what did he do now? Go downstairs and tell the management he had been at fault and had just spoken to his wife, who had arrived in England safe and sound from her charter flight? He put on his shoes and ran his fingers through his hair. He glanced at his watch. It was ten minutes to eight. If he nipped into the bar and had a quick drink it would be easier to face the manager and admit what had happened. Then, perhaps, they would get in touch with the police. Profuse apologies all round for putting everyone to enormous trouble.

He made his way to the ground floor and went straight to the bar, feeling self-conscious, a marked man, half-imagining everyone would look at him, thinking, ‘There’s the fellow with the missing wife.’ Luckily the bar was full and there wasn’t a face he knew. Even the chap behind the bar was an underling who hadn’t served him before. He downed his whisky and glanced over his shoulder to the reception hall. The desk was momentarily empty. He could see the manager’s back framed in the doorway of an inner room, talking to someone within. On impulse, coward-like, he crossed the hall and passed through the swing-door to the street outside.

‘I’ll have some dinner,’ he decided, ‘and then go back and face them. I’ll feel more like it once I’ve some food inside me.’

He went to the restaurant nearby where he and Laura had dined once or twice. Nothing mattered any more, because she was safe. The nightmare lay behind him. He could enjoy his dinner, despite her absence, and think of her sitting down with the Hills to a dull, quiet evening, early to bed, and on the following morning going to the hospital to sit with

Johnnie. Johnnie was safe, too. No more worries, only the awkward explanations and apologies to the manager at the hotel.

There was a pleasant anonymity sitting down at a corner table alone in the little restaurant, ordering vitello alla Marsala and half a bottle of Merlot. He took his time, enjoying his food but eating in a kind of haze, a sense of unreality still with him, while the conversation of his nearest neighbours had the same soothing effect as background music.

When they rose and left, he saw by the clock on the wall that it was nearly half-past nine. No use delaying matters any further. He drank his coffee, lighted a cigarette and paid his bill. After all, he thought, as he walked back to the hotel, the manager would be greatly relieved to know that all was well.

When he pushed through the swing-door, the first thing he noticed was a man in police uniform, standing talking to the manager at the desk. The reception clerk was there too. They turned as John approached, and the manager's face lighted up with relief.

'Eccolo!' he exclaimed. 'I was certain the signore would not be far away. Things are moving, signore. The two ladies have been traced, and they very kindly agreed to accompany the police to the Questura. If you will go there at once, this agente di polizia will escort you.'

John flushed. 'I have given everyone a lot of trouble,' he said. 'I meant to tell you before going out to dinner, but you were not at the desk. The fact is that I have contacted my wife. She did make the flight to London after all, and I spoke to her on the telephone. It was all a great mistake.'

The manager looked bewildered. 'The signora is in London?' he repeated. He broke off, and exchanged a rapid conversation in Italian with the policeman. 'It seems that the ladies maintain they did not go out for the day, except for a little shopping in the morning,' he said, turning back to John. 'Then who was it the signore saw on the vaporetto?'

John shook his head. 'A very extraordinary mistake on my part which I still don't understand,' he said. 'Obviously, I did not see either my wife or the two ladies. I really am extremely sorry.'

More rapid conversation in Italian. John noticed the clerk watching him with a curious expression in his eyes. The manager was obviously apologising on John's behalf to the policeman, who looked annoyed and gave tongue to this effect, his voice increasing in volume, to the manager's concern. The whole business had undoubtedly given enormous trouble to a great many people, not least the two unfortunate sisters.

'Look,' said John, interrupting the flow, 'will you tell the agente I will go with him to

headquarters and apologise in person both to the police officer and to the ladies?’

The manager looked relieved. ‘If the signore would take the trouble,’ he said. ‘Naturally, the ladies were much distressed when a policeman interrogated them at their hotel, and they offered to accompany him to the Questura only because they were so distressed about the signora.’

John felt more and more uncomfortable. Laura must never learn any of this. She would be outraged. He wondered if there were some penalty for giving the police misleading information involving a third party. His error began, in retrospect, to take on criminal proportions.

He crossed the Piazza San Marco, now thronged with after-dinner strollers and spectators at the cafés, all three orchestras going full blast in harmonious rivalry, while his companion kept a discreet two paces to his left and never uttered a word.

They arrived at the police station and mounted the stairs to the same inner room where he had been before. He saw immediately that it was not the officer he knew but another who sat behind the desk, a sallow-faced individual with a sour expression, while the two sisters, obviously upset the active one in particular—were seated on chairs nearby, some underling in uniform standing behind them. John’s escort went at once to the police officer, speaking in rapid Italian, while John himself, after a moment’s hesitation, advanced towards the sisters.

‘There has been a terrible mistake,’ he said. ‘I don’t know how to apologise to you both. It’s all my fault, mine entirely, the police are not to blame.’

The active sister made as though to rise, her mouth twitching nervously, but he restrained her.

‘We don’t understand,’ she said, the Scots inflection strong. ‘We said goodnight to your wife last night at dinner, and we have not seen her since. The police came to our pension more than an hour ago and told us your wife was missing and you had filed a complaint against us. My sister is not very strong. She was considerably disturbed.’

‘A mistake. A frightful mistake,’ he repeated.

He turned towards the desk. The police officer was addressing him, his English very inferior to that of the previous interrogator. He had John’s earlier statement on the desk in front of him, and tapped it with a pencil.

‘So?’ he queried. ‘This document all lies? You not speaka the truth?’

‘I believed it to be true at the time,’ said John. ‘I could have sworn in a court of law that I saw my wife with these two ladies on a vaporetto in the Grand Canal this afternoon. Now I realise I was mistaken.’

‘We have not been near the Grand Canal all day,’ protested the sister, ‘not even on foot. We made a few purchases in the Merceria this morning, and remained indoors all afternoon. My sister was a little unwell. I have told the police officer this a dozen times, and the people at the pension would corroborate our story. He refused to listen.’

‘And the signora?’ rapped the police officer angrily. ‘What happen to the signora?’

‘The signora, my wife, is safe in England,’ explained John patiently. ‘I talked to her on the telephone just after seven. She did join the charter flight from the airport, and is now staying with friends.’

‘Then who you see on the vaporetto in the red coat?’ asked the furious police officer. ‘And if not these signorine here, then what signorine?’

‘My eyes deceived me,’ said John, aware that his English was likewise becoming strained. ‘I think I see my wife and these ladies but no, it was not so. My wife in aircraft, these ladies in pension all the time.’

It was like talking stage Chinese. In a moment he would be bowing and putting his hands in his sleeves.

The police officer raised his eyes to heaven and thumped the table. ‘So all this work for nothing,’ he said. ‘Hotels and pensiones searched for the signorine and a missing signora inglese, when here we have plenty, plenty other things to do. You maka a mistake. You have perhaps too much vino at mezzo giorno and you see hundred signore in red coats in hundred vaporetti.’ He stood up, rumpling the papers on his desk. ‘And you, signorine,’ he said, ‘you wish to make complaint against this person?’ He was addressing the active sister.

‘Oh no,’ she said, ‘no, indeed. I quite see it was all a mistake. Our only wish is to return at once to our pension.’

The police officer grunted. Then he pointed at John. ‘You very lucky man,’ he said. ‘These signorine could file complaint against you—very serious matter.’

‘I’m sure,’ began John, ‘I’ll do anything in my power ...’ ‘Please don’t think of it,’ exclaimed the sister, horrified. ‘We would not hear of such a thing.’ It was her turn to apologise to the

police officer. 'I hope we need not take up any more of your valuable time,' she said.

He waved a hand of dismissal and spoke in Italian to the underling. 'This man walk with you to the pension,' he said. 'Buona sera, signorine,' and, ignoring John, he sat down again at his desk.

'I'll come with you,' said John. 'I want to explain exactly what happened.'

They trooped down the stairs and out of the building, the blind sister leaning on her twin's arm, and once outside she turned her sightless eyes to John.

'You saw us,' she said, 'and your wife too. But not today. You saw us in the future.'

Her voice was softer than her sister's, slower, she seemed to have some slight impediment in her speech.

'I don't follow,' replied John, bewildered.

He turned to the active sister and she shook her head at him, frowning, and put her finger on her lips.

'Come along, dear,' she said to her twin. 'You know you're very tired, and I want to get you home.' Then, sotto voce to John, 'She's psychic. Your wife told you, I believe, but I don't want her to go into trances here in the street.'

God forbid, thought John, and the little procession began to move slowly along the street, away from police headquarters, a canal to the left of them. Progress was slow, because of the blind sister, and there were two bridges. John was completely lost after the first turning, but it couldn't have mattered less. Their police escort was with them, and anyway, the sisters knew where they were going.

'I must explain,' said John softly. 'My wife would never forgive me if I didn't,' and as they walked he went over the whole inexplicable story once again, beginning with the telegram received the night before and the conversation with Mrs Hill, the decision to return to England the following day, Laura by air, and John himself by car and train. It no longer sounded as dramatic as it had done when he had made his statement to the police officer, when, possibly because of his conviction of something uncanny, the description of the two vaporetos passing one another in the middle of the Grand Canal had held a sinister quality, suggesting abduction on the part of the sisters, the pair of them holding a bewildered Laura captive. Now that neither of the women had any further menace for him he spoke more naturally, yet with great sincerity, feeling for the first time that they were somehow both in sympathy with him and would understand.

‘You see,’ he explained, in a final endeavour to make amends for having gone to the police in the first place, ‘I truly believed I had seen you with Laura, and I thought ...’ he hesitated, because this had been the police officer’s suggestion and not his, ‘I thought that perhaps Laura had some sudden loss of memory, had met you at the airport, and you had brought her back to Venice to wherever you were staying.’

They had crossed a large square and were approaching a house at one end of it, with a sign ‘Perisione’ above the door. Their escort paused at the entrance.

‘Is this it?’ asked John.

‘Yes,’ said the sister. ‘I know it is nothing much from the outside, but it is clean and comfortable, and was recommended by friends.’ She turned to the escort. ‘Grazie,’ she said to him, ‘grazie tanto.’

The man nodded briefly, wished them ‘Buona notte,’ and disappeared across the campo.

‘Will you come in?’ asked the sister. ‘I am sure we can find you some coffee, or perhaps you prefer tea?’

‘No, really,’ John thanked her, ‘I must get back to the hotel. I’m making an early start in the morning. I just want to make quite sure you do understand what happened, and that you forgive me.’

‘There is nothing to forgive,’ she replied. It is one of the many examples of second sight that my sister and I have experienced time and time again, and I should very much like to record it for our files, if you will permit it.’

‘Well, as to that, of course,’ he told her, ‘but I myself find it hard to understand. It has never happened to me before.’

‘Not consciously, perhaps,’ she said, ‘but so many things happen to us of which we are not aware. My sister felt you had psychic understanding. She told your wife. She also told your wife, last night in the restaurant, that you were to experience trouble, danger, that you should leave Venice. Well, don’t you believe now that the telegram was proof of this? Your son was ill, possibly dangerously ill, and so it was necessary for you to return home immediately. Heaven be praised your wife flew home to be by his side.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ said John, ‘but why should I see her on the vaporetto with you and your sister when she was actually on her way to England?’

‘Thought transference, perhaps,’ she answered. ‘Your wife may have been thinking about us. We gave her our address, should you wish to get in touch with us. We shall be here another ten days. And she knows that we would pass on any message that my sister might have from your little one in the spirit world.’

‘Yes,’ said John awkwardly, ‘yes, I see. It’s very good of you.’ He had a sudden rather unkind picture of the two sisters putting on headphones in their bedroom, listening for a coded message from poor Christine. ‘Look, this is our address in London,’ he said. ‘I know Laura will be pleased to hear from you.’

He scribbled their address on a sheet torn from his pocket-diary, even, as a bonus thrown in, the telephone number, and handed it to her. He could imagine the outcome. Laura springing it on him one evening that the ‘old dears’ were passing through London on their way to Scotland, and the least they could do was to offer them hospitality, even the spare-room for the night. Then a seance in the living-room, tambourines appearing out of thin air.

‘Well, I must be off,’ he said. ‘Goodnight, and apologies, once again, for all that has happened this evening.’ He shook hands with the first sister, then turned to her blind twin. ‘I hope,’ he said, ‘that you are not too tired.’

The sightless eyes were disconcerting. She held his hand fast and would not let it go. ‘The child,’ she said, speaking in an odd staccato voice, ‘the child ... I can see the child ...’ and then, to his dismay, a bead of froth appeared at the corner of her mouth, her head jerked back, and she half-collapsed in her sister’s arms.

‘We must get her inside,’ said the sister hurriedly. ‘It’s all right, she’s not ill, it’s the beginning of a trance state.’

Between them they helped the twin, who had gone rigid, into the house, and set her down on the nearest chair, the sister supporting her. A woman came running from some inner room. There was a strong smell of spaghetti from the back regions. ‘Don’t worry,’ said the sister, ‘the signorina and I can manage. I think you had better go. Sometimes she is sick after these turns.’

‘I’m most frightfully sorry ...’ John began, but the sister had already turned her back, and with the signorina was bending over her twin, from whom peculiar choking sounds were proceeding. He was obviously in the way, and after a final gesture of courtesy, ‘Is there anything I can do?’, which received no reply, he turned on his heel and began walking across the square. He looked back once, and saw they had closed the door.

What a finale to the evening! And all his fault. Poor old girls, first dragged to police

headquarters and put through an interrogation, and then a psychic fit on top of it all. More likely epilepsy. Not much of a life for the other sister, but she seemed to take it in her stride. An additional hazard, though, if it happened in a restaurant or in the street. And not particularly welcome under his and Laura's roof should the sisters ever find themselves beneath it, which he prayed would never happen.

Meanwhile, where the devil was he? The square, with the inevitable church at one end, was quite deserted. He could not remember which way they had come from police headquarters, there had seemed to be so many turnings.

Wait a minute, the church itself had a familiar appearance. He drew nearer to it, looking for the name which was sometimes on notices at the entrance. San Giovanni in Bragora, that rang a bell. He and Laura had gone inside one morning to look at a painting by Cima da Conegliano. Surely it was only a stone's throw from the Riva degli Schiavoni and the open wide waters of the San Marco lagoon, with all the bright lights of civilization and the strolling tourists? He remembered taking a small turning from the Schiavoni and they had arrived at the church. Wasn't that the alley-way ahead? He plunged along it, but halfway down he hesitated. It didn't seem right, although it was familiar for some unknown reason.

Then he realised that it was not the alley they had taken the morning they visited the church, but the one they had walked along the previous evening, only he was approaching it from the opposite direction. Yes, that was it, in which case it would be quicker to go on and cross the little bridge over the narrow canal, and he would find the Arsenal on his left and the street leading down to the Riva degli Schiavoni to his right. Simpler than retracing his steps and getting lost once more in the maze of back streets.

He had almost reached the end of the alley, and the bridge was in sight, when he saw the child. It was the same little girl with the pixie-hood who had leapt between the tethered boats the preceding night and vanished up the cellar steps of one of the houses. This time she was running from the direction of the church the other side, making for the bridge. She was running as if her life depended on it, and in a moment he saw why. A man was in pursuit, who, when she glanced backwards for a moment, still running, flattened himself against a wall, believing himself unobserved. The child came on, scampering across the bridge, and John, fearful of alarming her further, backed into an open doorway that led into a small court.

He remembered the drunken yell of the night before which had come from one of the houses near where the man was hiding now. This is it, he thought, the fellow's after her again, and with a flash of intuition he connected the two events, the child's terror then and now, and the murders reported in the newspapers, supposedly the work of some madman. It could be coincidence, a child running from a drunken relative, and yet, and yet ... His

heart began thumping in his chest, instinct warning him to run himself, now, at once, back along the alley the way he had come—but what about the child? What was going to happen to the child?

Then he heard her running steps. She hurtled through the open doorway into the court in which he stood, not seeing him, making for the rear of the house that flanked it, where steps led presumably to a back entrance. She was sobbing as she ran, not the ordinary cry of a frightened child, but the panic-stricken intake of breath of a helpless being in despair. Were there parents in the house who would protect her, whom he could warn? He hesitated a moment, then followed her down the steps and through the door at the bottom, which had burst open at the touch of her hands as she hurled herself against it.

‘It’s all right,’ he called. ‘I won’t let him hurt you, it’s all right,’ cursing his lack of Italian, but possibly an English voice might reassure her. But it was no use—she ran sobbing up another flight of stairs, which were spiral, twisting, leading to the floor above, and already it was too late for him to retreat. He could hear sounds of the pursuer in the courtyard behind, someone shouting in Italian, a dog barking. This is it, he thought, we’re in it together, the child and I. Unless we can bolt some inner door above he’ll get us both.

He ran up the stairs after the child, who had darted into a room leading off a small landing, and followed her inside and slammed the door, and, merciful heaven, there was a bolt which he rammed into its socket. The child was crouching by the open window. If he shouted for help someone would surely hear, someone would surely come before the man in pursuit threw himself against the door and it gave, because there was no one but themselves, no parents, the room was bare except for a mattress on an old bed, and a heap of rags in one corner.

‘It’s all right,’ he panted, ‘it’s all right,’ and held out his hand, trying to smile.

The child struggled to her feet and stood before him, the pixie-hood falling from her head on to the floor. He stared at her, incredulity turning to horror, to fear. It was not a child at all but a little thick-set woman dwarf, about three feet high, with a great square adult head too big for her body, grey locks hanging shoulder-length, and she wasn’t sobbing any more, she was grinning at him, nodding her head up and down.

Then he heard the footsteps on the landing outside and the hammering on the door, and a barking dog, and not one voice but several voices, shouting, ‘Open up! Police!’ The creature fumbled in her sleeve, drawing a knife, and as she threw it at him with hideous strength, piercing his throat, he stumbled and fell, the sticky mess covering his protecting hands.

And he saw the vaporetto with Laura and the two sisters steaming down the Grand Canal, not today, not tomorrow, but the day after that, and he knew why they were together and for

what sad purpose they had come. The creature was gibbering in its corner. The hammering and the voices and the barking dog grew fainter, and, 'Oh God,' he thought, 'what a bloody silly way to die....'

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