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# Five Ghosts in Venice



It was past midnight, and the orchestra had stopped playing. Jerry got up from his seat at the table in the cafe and walked across the huge Piazza San Marco. He turned and went past the facade of the cathedral, past the Doge's Palace, which gleamed white with all its tracery, and then down between the two high pillars to the water's edge. He stopped and looked out at the canals. With his eyes he followed the gliding of a gondola, and then he saw an empty vaporetto, \*ghostlike and fast-moving, far out in the center of the channel. He was looking out across St. Marks Canal to the dim outlines of San Giorgio Island when a shadow fell across the pavement and he heard a man's voice.

"You American?"

Jerry nodded.

"Just come to Venice?"

The stranger was a tall, lean man with a haunted look in his eyes. Even though the night was damp and hot, he wore a coat and an old hat with the brim turned down. His hands trembled as if he had a fever.

Out in the channel the vaporetto

vanished into the darkness.

"Been here a few days," Jerry said. The sleeves of the man's long coat were frayed, and his lean face had a stubble of beard on it.

*He's down and out in Venice, Jerry thought.* And so he wasn't surprised when he heard the man say, "Maybe you can help a fellow American?"

Jerry waited.

Then he saw the man put his long hand into his coat pocket and draw out a small object that glistened in the half-darkness.

"Give me ten for it and it's yours, kid."

"What is it?"

"A miniature. I painted it myself. It's worth a good hundred. Two hundred. More. But give me ten dollars, and you'll have something to take home to your girl."

He put the miniature into Jerry's hand, and it was cold, almost icy to the touch.

"Ten dollars. You're about 18, right? You have a girl, right? Bring her something from Venice." Then he asked, "How long are you going to be here, kid?"

"I'll tomorrow afternoon."

"Then you're going home?"

"Yes." "Home," the man said and was silent.

All the time they were talking, the icy miniature lay between Jerry's closed fingers. Suddenly the man spoke again.

"Give me ten dollars. It'll be the best buy you'll ever make."

His hand grabbed Jerry and pulled him to a little pool of light. "Take a good look at it," Jerry lifted the miniature into the spill of light. He saw that

it was beautiful.

"The Guiccioli miniature," the man said in a hushed voice, "a copy of the Guiccioli miniature. The original is in the Pitti Palace in Florence. I stood there and copied it, day after day, until they wanted to throw me out. The Guiccioli miniature."

It was the face of a very beautiful woman with brown, liquid eyes and auburn hair. Her features were small and perfectly shaped. But it was the eyes that haunted Jerry—the amazing eyes.

He looked up slowly.

"I came here years ago to be a great painter. And I'll soon die and all I have to offer is a copy. My whole life is nothing but a copy. Nothing. Nothing. Give me ten bucks for the picture."

Jerry looked down again at the miniature and then, suddenly with a shock, he remembered. Theresa Guiccioli... Lord Byron, the great romantic poet... the two of them had been in love.

Byron must have had the miniature painted to carry with him when they were apart. And so this was Theresa Guiccioli, Byron's Countess Guiccioli.

"How about it?"

"Jerry hesitated. "I've got very little money left myself," he said. "I came over here with only a little money. I'm a college student. So you can see, I..."

His voice trailed off into silence. The look in the man's eyes pierced him. The stranger seemed so desperate, so alone, so filled with dread. He began to plead.

"The original is priceless. Go to the Pitti and compare it with this copy. You won't be able to tell the difference. Byron had it painted by one of the great artists of the day. The original is worth a hundred grand—a hundred

grand, kid. And I'm offering it to you for ten bucks. I'm broke. Nobody wants to buy it from me. I need money. I need it badly—anything I can get."

Out on the glimmering canal, the lean form of a gondola wavered into view and then slowly faded into the darkness. The sound of a boat whistle came from a great distance. It was a haunting, mournful sound.

"All right," said Jerry. "I'll buy it." They moved out of the pool of light, and Jerry gave the man the money. He dropped the miniature into his pocket.

"It's the best buy you ever made." The man's voice was now mocking and bitter.

"What are you going to do with the money?" Jerry asked.

"Pat. And then get a ticket out of here."

"Where to?"

"When a can a doomed man go?" The man's eyes glittered and then faded into the darkness.

Jerry stood there a long time. Then he turned and made his way back, across the great square and past the empty tables of the cafes. He went into a long, gloomy arcade and from there along the quiet alleys and narrow streets. He passed over a narrow bridge and came at last to the little boarding house where he was staying. The whole time he walked, he felt as if he was being followed; he felt as if a long, lean shadow were walking behind him. He turned to look over his shoulder; a number of times on the way. No one was there. There was nothing behind him but the empty al-

leys and streets—and the night.

Jerry Moore went into the boardinghouse with its peeling walls and climbed up the dark flight of stairs. He opened the door of his little room and went in. He turned on the light and looked again at the miniature. He thought of Byron and the lovely poetry he had written—"She walks in beauty, like the night." He could still remember that from English class. He looked at the terrifying beauty of the woman in the miniature. Sub-

*Suddenly, the miniature grew even icier to his touch. . . . His hands became clammy.*

Suddenly, the miniature grew even icier to his touch. The beautiful face of the woman began to seem almost repellent to him. His hands became clammy.

Jerry got up and went to the old, streaked mirror that hung on the wall. It was his own face that looked back at him—but it had changed somehow. His face was now white and drawn with fear. His eyes had become two black pools.

And now Jerry felt that for some strange, inexplicable reason, with the passing of the miniature to him, he, too, had become a doomed man. The painter had passed a curse to him.

Jerry turned out the light. He went over to the window and opened it wide. He stood there, looking down at the dark waters of the canal. He knew that



these were the same dark Venetian waters that Lord Byron had looked into in 1819, when he had first seen his beloved countess, Teresa Guiccioli. Beloved?

No! Repellent. Terrifying. Jerry's face was tight with fear. He looked as frightened as the poor painter had looked when they had made their bargain near the canal. Then Jerry shivered slightly and turned away from the window.

His sleep that night was restless. He awoke several times. Once, he was sure he heard something. He sprang out of his bed. He stared straight ahead and broke out in a cold sweat. He knew he could not stay in this room. He dressed in a panic. He stood for an instant in the center of the room, stock-still.

His eyes fixed on the doorknob. He could have sworn that it was beginning to turn, slowly.

Then he screamed, and the knob stopped turning.

After a while, Jerry went to the door. He turned the lock very carefully and very slowly. He opened the door an inch at a time. He peered out.

The hallway was dim but it was empty. There was no one outside. Jerry closed the door. He went to the window of his room and stood there, looking down at the canal as he had earlier in the evening.

Then he made his decision. He went to the bureau and picked up the miniature. He looked at it for the last time. Then he went over to the open window and threw the tiny painting down into the black water.

There was a splash and then a vast silence. And in that silence Jerry felt—for the first time since he had met the mysterious painter—like himself again. He felt as if a great weight had

been lifted from him.

He was free of the curse—if there was one.

Then he began to laugh silently, and said aloud, "Silly, superstitious fool!"

He went back to bed and slept soundly. He didn't wake till the sun streamed in through the open window.

Just before his plane took off that afternoon, the stewardess came around with a selection of magazines and newspapers for the passengers to read. Jerry took one of the Italian newspapers. He settled back in his seat and began to read. It always gave him pleasure to speak and read Italian. That was one of the reasons he had come to Italy—to improve his Italian. There was a slight smile of pleasure on his face as he began to read. He slowly turned the first page. Then the smile slowly left his face.

He had come upon a picture of the man—the man he had met by the canal, the sad painter. The painter was lying on his back on a cobblestone street, his face turned up to the sky. Jerry read further.

The "painter" had been one of three men who had stolen the Guiccioli miniature from the Pitti Palace. Then he had double-crossed his partners and had run off with the treasure. His partners had finally caught up with him in Venice.

The police had captured the murderers and were now searching desperately for the priceless miniature.

Jerry slowly put down his paper. "Is anything wrong?" the stewardess asked him.

Jerry did not answer. ■

