

The Story of Salome

By Amelia B. Edwards

A few years ago, no matter how many, I, Harcourt Blunt, was travelling with my friend Coventry Turnour, and it was on the steps of our hotel that I received from him the announcement—he sent one to me—that he was again in love.

‘I tell you, Blunt,’ said my fellow-traveller, ‘she’s the loveliest creature I ever beheld in my life.’

I laughed outright.

‘My dear fellow,’ I replied, ‘you’ve so often seen the loveliest creature you ever beheld in your life.’

‘Ay, but I am in earnest now for the first time.’

‘And you have so often been in earnest for the first time! Remember the innkeeper’s daughter at Cologne.’

‘A pretty housemaid, whom no training could have made presentable.’

‘Then there was the beautiful American at Interlachen.’

‘Yes; but—’

‘And the Bella Marchesa at Prince Torlonia’s ball.’

‘Not one of them worthy to be named in the same breath with my imperial Venetian. Come with me to the Merceria and be convinced. By taking a gondola to St Mark’s Place we shall be there in a quarter of an hour.’

I went, and he raved of his new flame all the way. She was a Jewess—he would convert her. Her father kept a shop in the Merceria—what of that? He dealt only in costliest Oriental merchandise, and was as rich as a Rothschild. As for any probable injury to his own prospects, why need he hesitate on that account? What were ‘prospects’ when weighed against the happiness of one’s whole life? Besides, he was not ambitious. He didn’t care to go into Parliament. If his uncle Sir Geoffrey cut him off with a shilling, what then? He had a moderate independence of which no one living could deprive him, and what more could any reasonable man desire?

I listened, smiled, and was silent. I knew Coventry Turnour too well to attach the smallest degree of importance to anything that he might say or do in a matter of this kind. To be distractedly in love was his normal condition. We had been friends from boyhood; and since the time when he used to cherish a hopeless attachment to the young lady behind the counter of the tart-shop at Harrow, I had never known him ‘fancy-free’ for more than a few weeks at a time. He had gone through every phase of no less than three *grandes passions* during the five months that we had now been travelling together; and having left Rome about eleven weeks before with every hope laid waste, and a heart so broken that it could never by any possibility be put together again, he was now, according to the natural course of events, just ready to fall in love again.

We landed at the traghetto San Marco. It was a cloudless morning towards the middle of April, just ten years ago. The ducal palace glowed in the hot sunshine; the boatmen were clustered, gossiping, about the Mob; the orange-vendors were busy under the arches of the piazzetta; the flâneurs were already eating ices and smoking cigarettes outside the cafes. There was an Austrian military band, strapped, buckled, moustachioed, and white-coated, playing just in front of St Mark’s; and the shadow of the great bell-tower slept all across the square.

Passing under the low round archway leading to the Merceria, we plunged at once into that cool labyrinth of narrow, intricate, and picturesque streets, where the sun never penetrates—where no wheels are heard, and no beast of burden is seen—where every house is a shop, and every shop-front is open to the ground, as in an Oriental bazaar—where the upper balconies seem almost to meet overhead, and are separated by only a strip of burning sky—and where more than three people cannot march abreast in any part. Pushing our way as best we might through the motley crowd that here chatters, cheapens, buys, sells, and perpetually bustles to and fro, we came presently to a shop for the sale of Eastern goods. A few glass jars filled with spices, and some pieces of stuff, untidily strewed the counter next the street; but within, dark and narrow though it seemed, the place was crammed with costliest merchandise. Cases of gorgeous Oriental jewellery, embroideries and fringes of massive gold and silver bullion, precious drugs and spices, exquisite toys in filigree, miracles of carving in ivory, sandal-wood, and amber, jewelled yataghans, scimitars of state rich with ‘barbaric pearl and gold’, bales of Cashmere shawls, China silks, India muslins, gauzes, and the like, filled every inch of available space from floor to ceiling, leaving only a narrow lane from the door to the counter, and a still narrower passage to the rooms beyond the shop.

We went in. A young woman, who was sifting reading on a low seat behind the counter, laid aside her book, and rose slowly. She was dressed wholly in black. I cannot describe the fashion of her garments. I only know that they fell about her in long, soft, trailing folds, leaving a narrow band of fine cambric visible at the throat and wrists; and that, however graceful and unusual this dress may have been, I scarcely observed it, so entirely was I taken up with admiration of her beauty.

For she was indeed very beautiful—beautiful in a way that I had not anticipated. Coventry Turnour, with all his enthusiasm, had failed to do her justice. He had raved of her eyes—her large, lustrous, melancholy eyes—of the transparent paleness of her complexion, of the faultless delicacy of her features; but he had not prepared me for the unconscious dignity, the perfect nobleness and refinement, that informed her every look and gesture. My friend requested to see a bracelet at which he had been looking the day before. Proud, stately, silent, she unlocked the case in which it was kept, and laid it before him on the counter. He asked permission to take it over to the light. She bent her head, but answered not a word. It was like being waited upon by a young empress.

Turnour took the bracelet to the door and affected to examine it. It consisted of a double row of gold coins linked together at intervals by a bean-shaped ornament, studded with pink coral and diamonds. Coming back into the shop he asked me if I thought it would please his sister, to whom he had promised a remembrance of Venice.

‘It is a pretty trifle,’ I replied; ‘but surely a remembrance of Venice should be of Venetian manufacture. This, I suppose, is Turkish.’

The beautiful Jewess looked up. We spoke in English; but she understood and replied:

‘*E Greco, signore,*’ she said coldly.

At this moment an old man came suddenly forward from some dark counting-house at the back—a grizzled, bearded, eager-eyed Shylock, with a pen behind his ear.

‘Go in, Salome—go in, my daughter,’ he said hurriedly. ‘I will serve these gentlemen.’

She lifted her eyes to his for one moment—then moved silently away, and vanished in the gloom of the room beyond.

We saw her no more. We lingered awhile, looking over the contents of the jewel-cases; but in vain. Then Turnour bought his bracelet, and we went out again into the narrow streets, and back to the open daylight of the Gran' Piazza.

'Well,' he said breathlessly, 'what do you think of her?'

'She is very lovely.'

'Lovelier than you expected?'

'Much lovelier. But—'

'The sooner you succeed in forgetting her, the better.'

He vowed, of course, that he never would and never could forget her. He would hear of no incompatibilities, listen to no objections, believe in no obstacles. That the beautiful Salome was herself not only unconscious of his passion and indifferent to his person, but ignorant of his very name and station, were facts not even to be admitted on the list of difficulties. Finding him thus deaf to reason, I said no more.

It was all over, however, before the week was out.

'Look here, Blunt,' he said, coming up to me one morning in the coffee-room of our hotel just as I was sitting down to answer a pile of home-letters; 'would you like to go on to Trieste tomorrow? There, don't look at me like that—you can guess how it is with me. I was a fool ever to suppose she would care for me—a stranger, a foreigner, a Christian. Well, I'm horribly out of sorts anyhow—and—and I wish I was a thousand miles off at this moment!'

We travelled on together to Athens, and there parted, Turnour being bound for England, and I for the East. My own tour lasted many months longer. I went first to Egypt and the Holy Land; then joined an exploring party on the Euphrates; and at length, after just twelve months of Oriental life, found myself back again at Trieste about the middle of April in the year following that during which occurred the events I have just narrated. There I found that batch of letters and papers to which I had been looking forward for many weeks past; and amongst the former, one from Coventry Turnour. This time he was not only irrecoverably in love, but on the eve of matrimony. The letter was rapturous and extravagant enough. The writer was the happiest of men; his destined bride the loveliest and most amiable of her sex; the future a paradise; the past a melancholy series of mistakes. As for love, he had never, of course, known what it was till now.

And what of the beautiful Salome?

Not one word of her from beginning to end. He had forgotten her as utterly as if she had never existed. And yet how desperately in love and how desperately in despair he was 'one little year ago'! Ah, yes; but then it *was* 'one little year ago'; and who that had ever known Coventry Turnour would expect him to remember *la plus grande des grandes passions* for even half that time?

I slept that night at Trieste, and went on next day to Venice. Somehow, I could not get Turnour and his love affairs out of my head. I remembered our visit to the Merceria. I was haunted by the image of the beautiful Jewess. Was she still so lovely? Did she still sit reading in her wonted seat by the open counter, with the gloomy shop reaching away behind, and the cases of rich robes and jewels all around?

An irresistible impulse prompted me to go to the Merceria and see her once again. I went. It had been a busy morning with me, and I did not get there till between three and four o'clock in the afternoon. The place was crowded. I passed up the well-remembered street, looking out on both sides for the gloomy little shop with its unattractive counter; but in vain. When I had gone so far that I thought I must have passed it, I turned back.

House by house I retraced my steps to the very entrance, and still could not find it. Then, concluding that I had not gone far enough at first, I turned back again till I reached a spot where several streets diverged. Here I came to a standstill, for beyond this point I knew I had not passed before.

It was now only too evident that the Jew no longer occupied his former shop in the Merceria, and that my chance of discovering his whereabouts was exceedingly slender. I could not inquire of his successor, because I could not identify the house. I found it impossible even to remember what trades were carried on by his neighbours on either side. I was ignorant of his very name. Convinced, therefore, of the inutility of making any further effort, I gave up the search, and comforted myself by reflecting that my own heart was not made of adamant, and that it was, perhaps, better for my peace not to see the beautiful Salome again. I was destined to see her again, however, and that ere many days had passed over my head.

A year of more than ordinarily fatiguing Eastern travel had left me in need of rest, and I had resolved to allow myself a month's sketching in Venice and its neighbourhood before turning my face homewards. As, therefore, it is manifestly the first object of a sketcher to select his points of view, and as no more luxurious machine than a Venetian gondola was ever invented for the use of man, I proceeded to employ the first days of my stay in endless boatings to and fro: now exploring all manner of canals and canaletti; rowing out in the direction of Murano; now making for the islands beyond San Pietro Castello, and in the course of these pilgrimages noting down an infinite number of picturesque sites, and smoking an infinite number of cigarettes. It was, I think, about the fourth or fifth day of this pleasant work, when my gondolier proposed to take me as far as the Lido. It wanted about two hours to sunset, and the great sandbank lay not more than three or four miles away; so I gave the word, and in another moment we had changed our route and were gliding farther and farther from Venice at each dip of the oar. Then the long dull distant ridge that had all day bounded the shallow horizon rose gradually above the placid level of the Lagune, assumed a more broken outline, resolved itself into hillocks and hollows of tawny sand, showed here and there a patch of parched grass and tangled brake, and looked like the coasts of some inhospitable desert beyond which no traveller might penetrate. My boatman made straight for a spot where some stakes at the water's edge gave token of a landing-place; and here, though with some difficulty, for the tide was low, ran the gondola aground. I landed. My first step was among graves.

"E'l cimeterio giudaico, signore," said my gondolier, with a touch of his cap.

The Jewish cemetery! The *ghetto* of the dead! I remembered now to have read or heard long since how the Venetian Jews, cut off in death as in life from the neighbourhood of their Christian rulers, had been buried from immemorial time upon this desolate waste. I stooped to examine the headstone at my feet. It was but a shattered fragment, crusted over with yellow lichens, and eaten away by the salt sea air. I passed on to the next, and the next. Some were completely matted over with weeds and brambles; some were half-buried in the drifting sand; of some, only a corner remained above the surface. Here and there a name, a date, a fragment of heraldic carving, or part of a Hebrew inscription, was yet legible; but all were more or less broken and effaced.

Wandering on thus among graves and hillocks, ascending at every step, and passing some three or four glassy pools overgrown with gaunt-looking reeds, I presently found that I had reached the central and most elevated part of the Lido, and that I commanded an uninterrupted view on every side. On the one hand lay the broad, silent Lagune bounded by Venice and the Euganean hills—on the other, stealing up in long, lazy folds, and breaking noiselessly against the endless shore,

the blue Adriatic. An old man gathering shells on the seaward side, a distant gondola on the Lagune, were the only signs of life for miles around.

Standing on the upper ridge of this narrow barrier, looking upon both waters, and watching the gradual approach of what promised to be a gorgeous sunset, I fell into one of those wandering trams of thought in which the real and unreal succeed each other as capriciously as in a dream. I remembered how Goethe here conceived his vertebral theory of the skull—how Byron, too lame to walk, kept his horse on the Lido, and here rode daily to and fro—how Shelley loved the wild solitude of the place, wrote of it in *Julian and Maddalo*, listened, perhaps from this very spot, to the mad-house bell on the island of San Giorgio. Then I wondered if Titian had ever come hither from his gloomy house on the other side of Venice, to study the gold and purple of these western skies—if Othello had walked here with Desdemona—if Shylock was buried yonder, and Leah whom he loved ‘when he was a bachelor’.

And then in the midst of my reverie, I came suddenly upon another Jewish cemetery.

Was it indeed another, or but an outlying portion of the first? It was evidently another, and a more modern one. The ground was better kept. The monuments were newer. Such dates as I had succeeded in deciphering on the broken sepulchres lower down were all of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; but the inscriptions upon these bore reference to quite recent interments.

I went on a few steps farther. I stopped to copy a quaint Italian couplet on one tomb—to gather a wild forget-me-not from the foot of another—to put aside a bramble that trailed across a third—and then I became aware for the first time of a lady sitting beside a grave not a dozen yards from the spot on which I stood.

I had believed myself so utterly alone, and was so taken by surprise, that for the first moment I could almost have persuaded myself that she also was ‘of the stuff that dreams are made of’. She was dressed from head to foot in the deepest mourning; her face turned from me, looking towards the sunset; her cheek resting in the palm of her hand. The grave by which she sat was obviously recent. The scant herbage round about had been lately disturbed, and the marble headstone looked as if it had not yet undergone a week’s exposure to wind and weather.

Persuaded that she had not observed me, I lingered for an instant looking at her. Something in the grace and sorrow of her attitude, something in the turn of her head and the flow of her sable draperies, arrested my attention. Was she young? I fancied so. Did she mourn a husband?—a lover?—a parent? I glanced towards the headstone. It was covered with Hebrew characters; so that, had I even been nearer, it could have told me nothing.

But I felt that I had no right to stand there, a spectator of her sorrow, an intruder on his privacy. I proceeded to move noiselessly away. At that moment she turned and looked at me.

It was Salome.

Salome, pale and worn as from some deep and wasting grief, but more beautiful, if that could be, than ever. Beautiful, with a still more spiritual beauty than of old; with cheeks so wan and eyes so unutterably bright and solemn, that my very heart seemed to stand still as I looked upon them. For one second I paused, half fancying, half hoping that there was recognition in her glance; then, not daring to look or linger longer, turned away. When I had gone far enough to do so without discourtesy, I stopped and gazed back. She had resumed her former attitude, and was looking over towards Venice and the setting sun. The stone by which she watched was not more motionless.

The sun went down in glory. The last flush faded from the domes and bell-towers of Venice; the western peaks changed from rose to purple, from gold to grey; a scarcely perceptible film of mist became all at once visible upon the surface of the Lagune; and overhead, the first star

trembled into light. I waited and watched till the shadows had so deepened that I could no longer distinguish one distant object from another. Was that the spot? Was she still there? Was she moving? Was she gone? I could not tell. The more I looked, the more uncertain I became. Then, fearing to miss my way in the fast-gathering twilight, I struck down towards the water's edge, and made for the point at which I had landed.

I found my gondolier fast asleep, with his head on a cushion, and his bit of gondola-carpet thrown over him for a counterpane. I asked if he had seen any other boat put off from the Lido since I left? He rubbed his eyes, started up, and was awake in a moment.

'*Per Bacco, signore*, I have been asleep,' he said apologetically: 'I have seen nothing.'

'Did you observe any other boat moored hereabouts when we landed?'

'None, *signore*.

'And you have seen nothing of a lady in black?'

He laughed and shook his head.

'*Consolatevi, signore*,' he said archly. 'She will come tomorrow.'

Then, finding that I looked grave, he touched his cap, and with a gentle, '*Scusate, signore*,' took his place at the stern, and there waited. I bade him row to my hotel; and then, leaning dreamily back in my little dark cabin, I folded my arms, closed my eyes, and thought of Salome. How lovely she was! How infinitely more lovely than even my first remembrance of her! How was it that I had not admired her more that day in the Merceria? Was I blind, or had she become indeed more beautiful? It was a sad and strange place in which to meet her again. By whose grave was she watching? By her father's? Yes, surely by her father's. He was an old man when I saw him, and in the course of nature had not long to live. He was dead: hence my unavailing search in the Merceria. He was dead. His shop was let to another occupant. His stock-in-trade was sold and dispersed. And Salome—was she left alone? Had she no mother? no brother?—no lover? Would her eyes have had that look of speechless woe in them if she had any very near or dear tie left on earth? Then I thought of Coventry Turnour, and his approaching marriage. Did he ever really love her? I doubted it. 'True love,' saith an old song, 'can ne'er forget'; but he had forgotten, as though the past had been a dream. And yet he was in earnest while it lasted—would have risked all for her sake, if she would have listened to him. Ah, if she *had* listened to him! And then I remembered that he had never told me the particulars of that affair. Did she herself reject him, or did he lay his suit before her father? And was he rejected only because he was a Christian? I had never cared to ask these things while we were together; but now I would have given the best hunter in my stables to know every minute detail connected with the matter.

Pondering thus, travelling over the same ground again and again, wondering whether she remembered me, whether she was poor, whether she was indeed alone in the world, how long the old man had been dead, and a hundred other things of the same kind—I scarcely noticed how the watery miles glided past, or how the night closed in. One question, however, recurred oftener than any other: How was I to see her again?

I arrived at my hotel; I dined at the *table d'hôte*; I strolled out, after dinner, to my favourite cafe in the piazza; I dropped in for half an hour at the Fenice, and heard one act of an extremely poor opera; I came home restless, uneasy, wakeful; and sitting for hours before my bedroom fire, asked myself the same perpetual question, How was I to see her again?

Fairly tired out at last, I fell asleep in my chair, and when I awoke the sun was shining upon my window.

I started to my feet. I had it now. It flashed upon me, as if it came with the sunlight. I had but to go again to the cemetery, copy the inscription upon the old man's tomb, ask my learned friend

Professor Nicolai, of Padua, to translate it for me, and then, once in possession of names and dates, the rest would be easy.

In less than an hour, I was once more on my way to the Lido.

I took a rubbing of the stone. It was the quickest way, and the surest; for I knew that in Hebrew everything depended on the pointing of the characters, and I feared to trust my own untutored skill. This done, I hastened back, wrote my letter to the professor, and dispatched both letter and rubbing by the midday train.

The professor was not a prompt man. On the contrary he was a pre-eminently slow man; dreamy, indolent, buried in Oriental lore. From any other correspondent one might have looked for a reply in the course of the morrow; but from Nicolai of Padua it would have been folly to expect one under two or three days. And in the meanwhile? Well, in the meanwhile there were churches and palaces to be seen, sketches to be made, letters of introduction to be delivered. It was, at all events, of no use to be impatient.

And yet I was impatient—so impatient that I could neither sketch, nor read, nor sit still for ten minutes together. Possessed by an uncontrollable restlessness, I wandered from gallery to gallery, from palace to palace, from church to church. The imprisonment of even a gondola was irksome to me. I was, as it were, impelled to be moving and doing; and even so, the day seemed endless.

The next was even worse. There was just the possibility of a reply from Padua, and the knowledge of that possibility unsettled me for the day. Having watched and waited for every post from eight to four, I went down to the *traghetto* of St Mark's, and was there hailed by my accustomed gondolier.

He touched his cap and waited for orders.

'Where to, *signore*?' he asked, finding that I remained silent.

'To the Lido.'

It was an irresistible temptation, and I yielded to it; but I yielded in opposition to my judgment. I knew that I ought not to haunt the place. I had resolved that I would not. And yet I went.

Going along, I told myself that I had only come to reconnoitre. It was not unlikely that she might be going to the same spot about the same hour as before; and in that case I might overtake her gondola by the way, or find it moored somewhere along the shore. At all events, I was determined not to land. But we met no gondola beyond San Pietro Castello; saw no sign of one along the shore. The afternoon was far advanced; the sun was near going down; we had the Lagune and the Lido to ourselves.

My boatman made for the same landing-place, and moored his gondola to the same stake as before. He took it for granted that I meant to land; and I landed. After all, however, it was evident that Salome could not be there, in which case I was guilty of no intrusion. I might stroll in the direction of the cemetery, taking care to avoid her, if she were anywhere about, and keeping well away from that part where I had last seen her. So I broke another resolve, and went up towards the top of the Lido. Again I came to the salt pools and the reeds; again stood with the sea upon my left hand and the Lagune upon my right, and the endless sandbank reaching on for miles between the two. Yonder lay the new cemetery. Standing thus I overlooked every foot of the ground. I could even distinguish the headstone of which I had taken the rubbing the morning before. There was no living thing in sight. I was, to all appearance, as utterly alone as Enoch Arden on his desert island.

Then I strolled on, a little nearer, and a little nearer still; and then, contrary to all my determinations, I found myself standing upon the very spot, beside the very grave, which I had made my mind on no account to approach.

The sun was now just going down—had gone down, indeed, behind a bank of golden-edged cumuli—and was flooding earth, sea, and sky with crimson. It was at this hour that I saw her. It was upon this spot that she was sitting. A few scant blades of grass had sprung up here and there upon the grave. Her dress must have touched them as she sat there—her dress; perhaps her hand. I gathered one, and laid it carefully between the leaves of my note-book.

At last I turned to go, and, turning, met her face to face!

She was distant about six yards, and advancing slowly towards the spot on which I was standing. Her head drooped slightly forward; her hands were clasped together; her eyes were fixed upon the ground. It was the attitude of a null. Startled, confused, scarcely knowing what I did, I took off my hat, and drew aside to let her pass.

She looked up—hesitated—stood still—gazed at me with a strange, without another glance, and resumed her former place and attitude beside her father's grave.

I turned away. I would have given worlds to speak to her; but I had not dared, and the opportunity was gone. Yet I might have spoken! She looked at me—looked at me with so strange and piteous an expression in her eyes—continued looking at me as long as one might have counted five. . . I might have spoken. I surely might have spoken! And now—ah! now it was impossible. She had fallen into the old thoughtful attitude with her cheek resting on her hand. Her thoughts were far away. She had forgotten my very presence.

I went back to the shore, more disturbed and uneasy than ever. I spent all the remaining daylight in rowing up and down the margin of the Lido, looking for her gondola—hoping, at all events, to see her put off—to follow her, perhaps, across the waste of waters. But the dusk came quickly on, and then darkness, and I left at last without having seen any further sign or token of her presence.

Lying awake that night, tossing uneasily upon my bed, and thinking over the incidents of the last few days, I found myself perpetually recurring to that long, steady, sorrowful gaze which she fixed upon me in the cemetery. The more I thought of it, the more I seemed to feel that there was in it some deeper meaning than I, in my confusion, had observed at the time. It was such a strange look—a look almost of entreaty, I asking for help or sympathy; like the dumb appeal in the eyes of a sick animal. Could this really be? What, after all, more possible than that, left alone in the world—with, perhaps, not a single male relation to advise her—she found herself in some position of present difficulty, and knew not where to turn for help? All this might well be. She had even, perhaps, some instinctive feeling that she might trust me. Ah! if she would indeed trust me . . .

I had hoped to receive my Paduan letter by the morning delivery; but morning and afternoon went by as before, and still no letter came. As the day began to decline, I was again on my way to the Lido; this time for the purpose, and with the intention, of speaking to her. I landed, and went direct to the cemetery. It had been a dull day. Lagune and sky were both one leaden uniform grey, and a mist hung over Venice.

I saw her from the moment I reached the upper ridge. She was walking slowly to and fro among the graves, like a stately shadow. I had felt confident, somehow, that she would be there; and now, for some reason that I could not have defined for my life, I felt equally confident that she expected me.

Trembling and eager, yet half dreading the moment when she should discover my presence, I hastened on, printing the loose sand at every noiseless step. A few moments more, and I should overtake her, speak to her, hear the music of her voice—that music which I remembered so well, though a year had gone by since I last heard it. But how should I address her? What had I to say? I knew not. I had no time to think. I could only hurry on till within some ten feet of her trailing garments; stand still when she turned, and uncover before her as if she were a queen.

She paused and looked at me, just as she had paused and looked at me the evening before. With the same sorrowful meaning in her eyes; with even more than the same entreating expression. But she waited for me to speak.

I did speak. I cannot recall what I said; I only know that I faltered something of an apology—mentioned that I had had the honour of meeting her before, many months ago; and, trying to say more—trying to express how thankfully and proudly I would devote myself to any service. however humble, however laborious, I failed both in voice and words, and broke down utterly.

Having come to a stop, I looked up, and found her eyes still fixed upon me.

‘You are a Christian,’ she said.

A trembling came upon me at the first sound of her voice. It was the same voice; distinct, melodious, scarce louder than a whisper—and yet it was not quite the same. There was a melancholy in the music, and, if I may use a word which, after all, fails to express my meaning, a *remoteness*, that fell upon my ear like the plaintive cadence in an autumnal wind.

I bent my head, and answered that I was.

She pointed to the headstone of which I had taken a rubbing a day or two before.

‘A Christian soul lies there,’ she said, ‘laid in earth without one Christian prayer—with Hebrew rites—in a Hebrew sanctuary. Will you, stranger, perform an act of piety towards the dead?’

‘The Signora has but to speak,’ I said. ‘All that she wishes shall be done.’

‘Read one prayer over this grave; trace a cross upon this stone.’

‘I will.’

She thanked me with a gesture, slightly bowed her head, drew her outer garment more closely round her, and moved away to a rising ground at some little distance. I was dismissed. I had no excuse for lingering—no right to prolong the interview—no business to remain there one moment longer. So I left her there, nor once looked back till I reached the last point from which I knew I should be able to see her. But when I turned for that last look she was no longer in sight.

I had resolved to speak to her, and this was the result. A stranger interview never, surely, fell to the lot of man! I had said nothing that I meant to say—had learnt nothing that I sought to know. With regard to her circumstances, her place of residence, her very name, I was no wiser than before. And yet I had, perhaps, no reason to be dissatisfied. She had honoured me with her confidence, and entrusted to me a task of some difficulty and importance. It now only remained for me to execute that task as thoroughly and as quickly as possible. That done, I might fairly hope to win some place in her remembrance—by and by, perhaps, in her esteem.

Meanwhile, the old question rose again—whose grave could it be? I had settled this matter so conclusively in my own mind from the first, that could scarcely believe even now that it was not her father’s. Yet that he should have died a secret convert to Christianity was incredible. Whose grave could it be? A lover’s? a Christian lover’s? Alas! it might be. Or a sister’s? In either of these cases it was more than probable that Salome was herself a convert. But I had no time to waste in conjecture. I must act, and act promptly.

I hastened back to Venice as fast as my gondolier could row me; and as we went along I promised myself that all her wishes should be carried out before she visited the spot again. To at once secure the services of a clergyman who would go with me to the Lido at early dawn, and there read some portion, at least, of the burial-service! and at the same time to engage a stonemason to cut the cross—to have all done before she, or anyone, should have approached the place next day, was my especial object. And that object I was resolved to carry out, though I had to search Venice through before I laid my head upon the pillow.

I found my clergyman without difficulty. He was a young man occupying rooms in the same hotel, and on the same floor as myself. I had met him each day at the *table d'hôte*, and conversed with him once or twice in the reading-room. He was a North countryman, had not long since taken orders, and was both gentlemanly and obliging. He promised in the readiest manner to do all that I required, and to breakfast with me at six the next morning, in order that we might reach the cemetery by eight.

To find my stonemason, however, was not so easy; and yet I went to work methodically enough. I began with the Venetian Directory; then copied a list of stonemasons' names and addresses; then took a gondola a *due rame*, and started upon my voyage of discovery.

But a night's voyage of discovery among the intricate back canaletti of Venice is no very easy and no very safe enterprise. Narrow, tortuous, densely populated, often blocked by huge hay, wood, and provision barges, almost wholly unlighted, and so perplexingly alike that no mere novice in Venetian topography need ever hope to distinguish one from another, they baffle the very gondoliers, and are a terra incognita to all but the dwellers therein.

I succeeded, however, in finding three of the places entered on my list. At the first I was told that the workman of whom I was in quest was working by the week somewhere over by Murano, and would not be back again till Saturday night. At the second and third, I found the men at home, supping with their wives and children at the end of the day's work; but neither would consent to undertake my commission. One, after a whispered consultation with his son, declined reluctantly. The other told me plainly that he dared not do it, and that he did not believe I should find a stonemason in Venice who would be bolder than himself.

The Jews, he said, were rich and powerful; no longer an oppressed people; no longer to be insulted even in Venice with impunity. To cut a Christian cross upon a Jewish headstone in the Jewish cemetery, would be 'a sort of sacrilege', and punishable, no doubt, by the law. This sounded like truth; so finding that my rowers were by no means confident of their way, and that the canaletti were dark as the catacombs, I prevailed upon the stonemason to sell me a small mallet and a couple of chisels, and made up my mind to commit the sacrilege myself.

With this single exception, all was done next morning as I had planned to do. My new acquaintance breakfasted with me, accompanied me to the Lido, read such portions of the burial-service as seemed proper to him, and then, having business in Venice, left me to my task. It was by no means an easy one. To a skilled hand it would have been, perhaps, the work of half an hour; but it was my first effort, and rude as the thing was—a mere grooved attempt at a Latin cross, about two inches and a half in length, cut close at the bottom of the stone, where it could be easily concealed by a little piling of the sand—it took me nearly four hours to complete. While I was at work, the dull grey morning grew duller and greyer; a thick sea fog drove up from the Adriatic, and a low moaning wind came and went like the echo of a distant requiem. More than once I started, believing that she had surprised me there—fancying I saw the passing of a shadow—heard the rustling of a garment—the breathing of a sigh. But no. The mists and the moaning wind deceived me. I was alone.

When at length I got back to my hotel, it was just two o'clock. The hall-porter put a letter into my hand as I passed through. One glance at that crabbed superscription was enough. It was from Padua. I hastened to my room, tore open the envelope, and read these words:

'CARO SIGNORE,—The rubbing you send is neither ancient nor curious, as I fear you suppose it to be. *Altro*; it is of yesterday. It merely records that one Salome, the only and beloved child of a certain Isaac da Costa, died last autumn on the eighteenth of October, aged twenty-one years, and that by the said Isaac da Costa this monument is erected to the memory of her virtues and his grief.

'I pray you *caro signore*, to receive the assurance of my sincere esteem.

NICOLO NICOIAI.

'Padua, April 27th, 1857.'

The letter dropped from my hand. I seemed to have read without understanding it. I picked it up; went through it again, word by word; sat down; rose up; took a turn across the room; felt confused, bewildered, incredulous.

Could there, then, be two Salomes? or was there some radical and extraordinary mistake?

I hesitated; I knew not what to do. Should I go down to the Merceria, and see whether the name of da Costa was known in the *quartier*? Or find out the registrar of births and deaths for the Jewish district? Or call upon the principal rabbi, and learn from him who this second Salome had been, and in what degree of relationship she stood towards the Salome whom I knew? I decided upon the last course. The chief rabbi's address was easily obtained. He lived in an ancient house on the Giudecca, and there I found him—a grave, stately old man, with a grizzled beard reaching nearly to his waist.

I introduced myself, and stated my business. I came to ask if he could give me any information respecting the late Salome da Costa, who died on the 18th of October last, and was buried on the Lido.

The rabbi replied that he had no doubt he could give me any information I desired, as he had known the lady personally, and was the intimate friend of her father.

'Can you tell me,' I asked, 'whether she had any dear friend or female relative of the same name—Salome?' The rabbi shook his head. 'I think not, he said. 'I remember no other maiden of that name.'

'Pardon me, but I know there was another,' I replied. 'There was a very beautiful Salome living in the Merceria when I was last in Venice, just this time last year.'

'Salome da Costa was very fair,' said the rabbi; 'and she dwelt with her father in the Merceria. Since her death, he hath removed to the neighbourhood of the Rialto.'

'This Salome's father was a dealer in Oriental goods,' I said, hastily.

'Isaac da Costa is a dealer in Oriental goods,' replied the old man very gently. 'We are speaking, my son, of the same persons.'

'Impossible!'

He shook his head again.

'But she lives!' I exclaimed, becoming greatly agitated. 'She lives. I have seen her. I have spoken to her. I saw her only last evening.'

'Nay,' he said compassionately, 'this is some dream. She of whom you speak is indeed no more.'

'I saw her only last evening,' I repeated.

'Where did you suppose you beheld her?'

'On the Lido.'

‘On the Lido?’

‘And she spoke to me. I heard her voice—heard it as distinctly as I hear my own at this moment.’

The rabbi stroked his beard thoughtfully, and looked at me. ‘You think you heard her voice!’ he ejaculated. ‘That is strange. What said she?’

I was about to answer. I checked myself—a sudden thought flashed upon me—I trembled from head to foot. ‘Have you—have you any reason for supposing that she died a Christian?’ I faltered.

The old man started, and changed colour.

‘I—I—that is a strange question,’ he stammered. ‘Why do you ask it?’

‘Yes or no?’ I cried wildly. ‘Yes or no?’

He frowned, looked down, hesitated. ‘I admit,’ he said, after a moment or two—‘I admit that I may have heard something tending that way. It may be that the maiden cherished some secret doubt. Yet she was no professed Christian.’

‘Laid in earth without one Christian prayer; with Hebrew rites; in a Hebrew sanctuary!’ I repeated to myself.

‘But I marvel how you come to have heard of this,’ continued the rabbi. ‘It was known only to her father and myself.’

‘Sir,’ I said solemnly, ‘I know now that Salome da Costa is dead; I have seen her spirit thrice, haunting the spot where—’

My voice broke. I could not utter the words.

‘Last evening, at sunset,’ I resumed, ‘was the third time. Never doubting that—that I indeed beheld her in the flesh, I spoke to her. She answered me. She—she told me this.’

The rabbi covered his face with his hands, and so remained for some time, lost in meditation. ‘Young man,’ he said at length, ‘your story is strange, and you bring strange evidence to bear upon it. It may be as you say; it may be that you are the dupe of some waking dream—I know not.’

He knew not; but I—ah! I knew, only too well. I knew now why she had appeared to me clothed with such unearthly beauty. I understood now that look of dumb entreaty in her eyes—that tone of strange remoteness in her voice. The sweet soul could not rest amid the dust of its kinsfolk, ‘unhousel’d, unanointed, unaneal’d’, lacking even ‘one Christian prayer above its grave. And now—was it all over? Should I never see her more?’

Never—ah! never. How I haunted the Lido at sunset for many a month, till spring had blossomed into autumn, and autumn had ripened into summer; how I wandered back to Venice year after year, at the same season, while yet any vestige of that wild hope remained alive; how my heart has never throbbled, my pulse never leaped, for love of mortal woman since that time—are details into which I need not enter here. Enough that I watched and waited but that her gracious spirit appeared to me no more. I wait still, but I watch no longer. I know now that our place of meeting will not be here.