

MY VENETIAN SINGER

A Short Story of the Venetian Ghetto

by GERTRUDE LANDA

THE opera was *Romeo and Juliet*. I sat entranced under the spell of the music, but my thoughts were elsewhere. They wandered, naturally enough, from the make-believe Verona on the stage to the real Verona I once visited. I smiled as I recalled the horse-trough receptacle full of visiting-cards shown to the curious as the tomb of Juliet. I seemed to lose all interest in the opera after that reflection. My thoughts, still flowing naturally, wandered off to Venice.

Ah, Venice! Who can ever forget the first impressions of that enchanting fairy city set in the silver lagoon? Romeo was singing now. The dulcet sweetness of his tones formed a charming accompaniment to the delicious memories that rushed through my thoughts.

Once again I was in a gondola, lulled to a reverie by the soft lapping of the water against the sides of the boat. Lazily, gracefully, stealthily almost, it picked its way through the tortuous narrow canals to the open lagoon. The sun was setting, and what vision is there more beautiful than the setting of the sun in Venice?

All along the vast firmament stretched a wondrous portcullis of ever-varying hues. Lower and lower the gate of evening was drawn down the skies. Azure blue was its crown high up in the heavens, red and fleecy gold were its bars, until where heaven and earth and water met, a dazzling ray of golden light marked the entrance to Paradise! And over all lay the soft silence of the Venetian autumn evening, broken only by the rhythmic lapping of the water on the gondola.

The glistening ferro at the prow described a graceful curve, the Euganean Mountain, with its glowing peak, disappeared. The fairy city of twinkling lights over which the beauteous veil of twilight hung rose from the seas before me. Soon my gondola was in the shadows of the broad Canareggio.

Above the restful silence of that delicious evening came the sound of a fresh young voice of rare sweetness. I turned an inquiring gaze upon my gondolier, supple, silent, and graceful on the platform of the boat behind my seat. Even

he was under the spell of the magic twilight, and it was some moments before he caught my gaze.

"THE Ghetto!" he said with a note of contempt, indicating, by a toss of his head, the building to the left.

I bade him slow down. He allowed the gondola to drift.

"Serenata?" I queried.

"No, signora," with another gesture of disgust.

But the instinct of the guide in the man prevailed. He pointed to a figure sitting on the canal bank with legs dangling over the water. It was the youth who was singing. He might have been seventeen or more. I indicated that I would like to be nearer.

What it was the youth sang I know not. I could not even say whether it was Italian. I half wished it was Hebrew, but I caught no word that I could recognise. I was enraptured by the beauty of the voice. Pure and fresh it rose on the evening air—a hymn to the twilight for aught I could tell.

Suddenly the youth saw me. His eyes had in them the soft poetical glow of the Jew. I held out a coin, for his clothes were ragged. A crazy boat was at his feet. In a moment he had sprung into it, had seized the oar, and was propelling the craft towards me.

My gondola made a quick movement away. I turned inquiringly towards my gondolier. He said something in a tone of protest. He was afraid, seemingly, that I was giving the tip which I should reserve for him to the unknown singer. There was anger in his swarthy, brigand-looking face, greed in his steely eyes.

I turned to the softer eyes of the singer, who was alongside now. He held out his hand, took the coin, doffed his ragged cap, and in the sweetest tones I had ever heard from the lips of a youth, said:

"Grazia, mia bella signora."

I am but a woman. I bowed to the compliment.

I would have spoken with the singer, even with the very few Italian words at

my command, but with swift strokes my gondola was shot away from him. Sweeter rose the youth's song; he waved his cap gaily—he kissed his hand. I kissed mine in return. Then my gondola turned into the Grand Canal, and the song ceased.

I LOOKED about me. Oh, yes. I had almost forgotten. I was in the theatre. Romeo had just ceased. The people were applauding. Were they applauding my singer? Was this song I had just heard the same? I seemed a little bewildered and walked out into the cool promenade.

"What do you think of the new tenor?" said a voice at my ear.

It was Kapinski, the famous critic.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"I have been introduced to him this evening," he said, "and I don't think this Italian name on the programme is his real name. I have a fancy he is one of us."

"I have that fancy, too," I replied. "Could you introduce me?"

He said he would be delighted. I waited after the opera in the saloon. The tenor's eyes attracted me the moment I saw him. He gazed curiously at me, and held my hand longer than the occasion necessitated. I paid him some compliment on his debut.

"Grazia, mia bella signora," he returned—and then I remembered!

"Once in Venice—" I said.

"Never have I forgotten your kindness," he answered in quaint, broken English. "Luck came to me that night. The coin you gave me—I wear it always on my watch chain."

"And the song?" I said.

"I always sing in *Romeo and Juliet*."

PHONE 33 - 7378.

GUIDO'S
 PASTRY
 & CONFECTIONERS

We are the Finest Pastry Cooks
 and Specialise for Jewish
 Clientele.

CALL AND SEE OUR FINE
 VARIETY OF DELIGHTFUL
 CAKES, etc.

Address: 145b JEPPE STREET
 (diagonally opp. Plaza),
 JOHANNESBURG.

Grain Bags,
 Woolpacks,
 Twines,
 Fencing Materials,
 Groceries,
 Produce,
 Etc., etc.

Send for
 PRICE LIST.

MOSHAL, GEVISSER (Pty.) Ltd.

MERCHANTS.

52, Queen St.,
 DURBAN.

Telegrams:
 "BUSYBEES."
 P.O. Box 1183.

CUTHBERTS FOR BOYS' SCHOOL SHOES