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The Four Horsemen

Written by Gregory Dowling

Published by Polygon

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The Four Horsemen

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Polygon

First published in paperback in Great Britain in 2017 by
Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

ISBN 978 1 84967 384 0
ebook ISBN 978 0 85790 930 5

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available on request from the British Library

Typeset by 3btype.com
Printed and bound by Grafica Veneta, Italy

For my nephew, Alvis

Foreword

After the publication of Alvisé Marangon's adventures in *Ascension* a number of people asked me where I had come across this story. The answer, as so often in Venice, is in the archives. The Archivio di Stato, housed in the ex-monastery of the Frari church, has over seventy kilometres of shelving, containing documents pertaining not only to every aspect of Venetian history but also to the history of every part of the world with which the Venetian Republic ever had dealings – and that really means most of the Western world and a goodly portion of the Eastern. It seems nothing ever got thrown away.

The archives contain all the reports drawn up by Venice's legions of confidential agents and spies. These documents have, of course, been extensively consulted and studied by historians, since they throw extraordinary light not only on to political matters but also on to aspects of Venetian daily life. Everyone, it seems, was under observation, and unflattering comparisons have been drawn to life in East Germany under the Stasi.

We have come to know details about the lives of some of the more diligent or observant spies, such as the ever-watchful Giambattista Manuzzi, who reported, among other things, on the suspicious dealings of a certain Giacomo Casanova – who would himself join the ranks of Venice's secret agents later in life.

However, not all the files and folders have been scrutinised. I found on one shelf a folder that had been pushed to the back, bound with a leather strap that seemed never to have been loosened. When I finally managed to open it I found not the usual short reports, intended for immediate scrutiny by the Inquisitors or by the Missier Grande, but long detailed narratives of certain otherwise unknown events in the history of the city. The fact that the folder was included among the other reports of secret agents suggested that the Inquisitors had

got hold of the manuscript, even if it had not originally been intended for them. Alvise Marangon wrote in reasonably correct Tuscan Italian, although a number of Venetian expressions crop up, and most of the dialogues are reported directly in dialect. He also uses the occasional English words, testifying to his own bilingualism. Given the nature of the stories he tells, it seems possible that he wrote these accounts later in life, when it might have seemed to him that no harm could accrue from their publication; the fact that the manuscript was catalogued among the secret reports suggests that the Inquisitors, learning of its existence, clearly disagreed with the author and confiscated it. Alvise wrote as if for a general audience, drawing on his experience as a *cicerone* to explain certain matters of Venetian life that might not be familiar to a non-Venetian.

I have done my best to maintain the tone and spirit of the original document. I have not attempted to translate it into a version of eighteenth-century English prose, since I feel it would be impossible to do so without sounding stilted and artificial. I have, however, striven to avoid anything too obviously anachronistic in the language. To avoid confusion I have modified all time-references to conform with current practice; in eighteenth-century Venice zero hour (or the 24th hour) corresponded to the Angelus, the ritual prayer recited half an hour after sunset.

This is the second of Alvise's adventures. I have not yet explored the entire contents of the folder, but it seems fairly clear that it does contain a number of other stories, which I will continue to translate so long as readers continue to be interested in them.

Gregory Dowling
Venice
July 2017

Venice, under the Dogeship of
Pietro Grimani (1741–52)

I

I didn't like the man who approached me at the Malvasia del Remedio. Unfortunately I made the mistake of making it clear that I didn't.

It wasn't entirely my fault. He should not have interrupted me while I was reading. And he should not have been so offensively slimy.

A fault-finder, had there been one in the tavern at that hour, might have hinted that perhaps I could have been a little more sober. But it had been a long day, it was cold outside and the Malmsey wine provided by the tavern was both comforting and reasonably priced. And like so many of the tavern's clients, I liked to indulge myself in the fancy that the very name of the place indicated that it offered a remedy to life's ills, even while I knew that Remedio just happened to be the proprietor's surname.

"Sior Marangon?" said this individual.

I looked up from my volume of Pope; it was a beautiful edition of the first two books of *The Iliad*, which had been given to me by a grateful client with good taste. The shift from Achilles' wrath to this man's fawning tone was jarring. His excessively tight clothes, over-powdered wig and fixed smile all added to the contrast, and to my irritation.

"That's my name," I said, in as civilly neutral a tone as my annoyance would allow.

"You work as a *cicerone* principally with English travellers, I believe," he said, and sat down at the table opposite me. He never stopped smiling; or, to be more accurate, he never stopped displaying his teeth, which gleamed in the light from the candle-bracket above my head. His eyes, which flittered around the room as he spoke, were entirely unaffected by the smile.

“That is the case,” I said. Although Venetian by birth I had grown up in England, thanks to the intermittently nomadic life led by my actress mother. Being able to speak both English and Venetian fluently was an undeniable advantage in the fiercely competitive world of the professional tour guides or *ciceroni*. “Are you proposing a new client? Because at the moment I am already engaged with a young nobleman.”

“Yes, I am aware of that,” he said. “And it is precisely on that subject that I have come to speak to you. On behalf of my master, Sior Molin. Sior Lucio Molin.”

“Ah,” I said.

His eyes fixed on me for one moment. “I gather you know of my master?”

“I’ve heard of him,” I said, my tone remaining neutral. I lifted my book in as obvious a fashion as possible.

He ignored the hint. “Then you will know he has one of the most sought-after gambling establishments in the city.”

“Yes,” I said.

“And he has asked me to propose a business arrangement with you.”

“Please thank your master, but tell him—”

He lifted his hand. “You have not yet heard his very generous offer.”

“No, and I don’t wish to hear it,” I said, deciding to abandon all semblance of civility. “When my clients ask me for advice on gambling establishments, I recommend the state *ridotto* and nowhere else. I have no wish to be blamed for any losses they might sustain.”

“Who is to say that they might not win?” he said, and somehow managed to reveal a few more gleaming teeth on both sides of his mouth.

“Who indeed?” I said. “But the answer remains no.”

“I understand that you accept pecuniary rewards from some of the artists that your clients visit.”

“Well, that’s different. When my clients buy a portrait from Sior Nazari or a *veduta* from Sior Marieschi, it’s possible that they may

be so lacking in taste as to be dissatisfied with the work, but the painting does exist. In real terms they are no poorer than they were before.”

“Visitors to Sior Molin’s establishment, of course, do not always win, but they certainly pass a pleasant and sociable evening in the best of company . . .”

“And long may they continue to do so,” I said. “I certainly won’t prevent any of my clients from visiting it. I just don’t wish to be the one who sends them there.”

“If I may say so,” he said, “you are turning down a considerable source of income, and one that is perfectly legitimate.”

It was here, perhaps, that I made my mistake. “I have little more than my reputation to keep me going,” I said, “and so I have no wish to jeopardise it for a few easy bribes.”

Suddenly his display of teeth became unambiguously menacing. “I will inform Sior Molin of your refusal – and also of your insult. He will not be pleased.”

It might have been more dignified on my part simply to dismiss him at this point with a wave of my hand and to return to the epic struggles of the Greeks and Trojans, but rather late I remembered that Lucio Molin, like so many managers of gambling establishments, had a number of burly henchmen, or *bravi*, in his employ, and so I mumbled a few words to the effect that I certainly had no wish to offend anyone. However, my interlocutor was already getting to his feet and paid no attention.

As he left me I caught the eye of Siora Remedio, who came over to my table.

“Another cup of wine, Sior Alvisè?” she said.

“I think I’d better not,” I said, although the temptation to drown my misgivings in Malmsey was strong. “Oh, by the way . . .”

“Yes?”

“Did you happen to notice if the man who was talking to me just now was with anyone else?”

“Anyone else?”

“Yes. Like a *bravo* – or two.”

“Oh dear,” she said. “Have you been getting into trouble again, Sior Alvise?”

“Again?” I said.

“Well, for a quiet young man who likes reading you do seem to have a few, um, unusual friends,” she said.

I knew who she was thinking of. My second job, slightly more lucrative though considerably less respectable, was as a confidential agent for the Missier Grande; this occasionally involved my meeting with one or more of the city’s *sbirri* or law-enforcers; “unusual” was probably the most flattering adjective that had ever been used to describe them. I had clearly made the mistake of using the tavern as a meeting-point rather too often.

“You know how it is as a *cicerone*,” I said, and hoped my vague arm-sweeping gesture would suggest all sorts of reasonable explanations. “Do you think you could just look outside and see if the man is still out there? Without making it too obvious?”

She picked up my empty tankard and moved towards the door. There were too many other customers for me to see what happened, but I suddenly heard her voice raised with the authoritative tones only possessed by the women who manage Venetian taverns (the husbands are never so imposing). “Be off with you! We don’t want your sort hanging around here!”

The clientele of the tavern looked towards the door with interest. It was a dull evening in November and her tone suggested a break in the monotony at least.

She came back to me. “Well, I sent them packing.”

“Who were they?” I said, trying to make my voice sound casual, and probably not succeeding.

“That smarmy type who was talking to you and two rough fellows carrying cudgels. Not the sort you should be mixing with, Sior Alvise.”

“No,” I agreed. “Definitely not. In fact, I’ll take your advice and have nothing to do with them. Could I leave by the kitchen door?” I could not imagine that they had gone very far from the tavern. They were probably waiting on the *fondamenta* alongside the nearby canal.

“The kitchen door?” she said. “It gives on to the canal.”

“Ah,” I said, just briefly toying with the idea of swimming home. “Well, maybe not, then . . .”

“But we’ve got a boat there.”

This was to be expected, since their supplies would arrive by boat; however, lending it to me seemed to go beyond what was expected from our hostess–client relationship. I said, “I see,” in a puzzled tone.

“All you have to do is swing it out and you should be able to reach the *calle* on the opposite side. We can pull it back.”

“That would be very kind,” I said, wondering if this was a regular occurrence with some of her more obstreperous customers.

“No problem, Sior Alvise.” Then a thought struck her. “You’ll settle the week’s bill, will you?”

I did not find this apprehension on her part in any way encouraging, but I dug into my purse and paid what she told me was due, wincing just a little when I realised quite how much Malmsey I must have consumed over the last few evenings.

I wrapped my cloak around me (the first really warm garment I had ever possessed, even more expensive than my weekly *malvasia* bill) and put on my tricorn hat. A pity I had come unequipped with a mask; it was already the middle of the month and half the population was indulging in the freedom offered by anonymity. However, I only used masks in those places that required them, like the city’s gambling houses and theatres, and this evening I had had no intention of engaging in any such activities.

I followed Siora Remedio towards the kitchen. I think this tame conclusion to the evening disappointed one or two of the clients, although they raised a salutary tankard in my direction.

It proved as simple as Siora Remedio had suggested. The kitchen had a door right on to the canal, and there lay the tavern’s simple *sandolo*, moored at both ends. I untied the rope at the prow and pushed off against the brick wall of the tavern; the boat swung out, its prow pointing towards the dark alley between two high buildings on the opposite side of the canal. I glanced to the right, and at the

far end of the canal, where it veered leftwards, I could dimly make out the bridge that led into the little square beneath the Querini palace. I thought I saw a figure on the bridge but paid no attention.

The alley had steps down to the canal and I managed to scramble out of the boat and on to their seaweedy surface without slipping straight back. Maybe I was not so very drunk after all, I congratulated myself.

I turned round and waved to Siora Remedio, who stood stalwartly framed against the light of her kitchen. She indicated that I should push the boat back, and I managed to do that too without falling into the canal. I should probably offer to give lessons in sobriety and deportment to the city's youth.

I then applied my keen brain to the question of where I was. "Casselleria," I said to myself, after just a second's calculation, and with a touch of self-congratulation on my geographical expertise. If there had been anyone around I would have told them that it was the street of the chest-makers, who had their own little shrine in the nearby church of Santa Maria Formosa. "And they helped to rescue the Venetian brides kidnapped by Istrian pirates back in the tenth century," I informed a passing rat. Sometimes *ciceroni* can be rather tedious.

I now made my second big mistake of the evening. It would have been perfectly easy to follow the Casselleria northwards and head towards the Rialto, comfortably distant from any lurking *bravi*, and then take a circuitous route back homewards. Instead, feeling complacent in my knowledge of the city's geography, I took the first turning left, which led, after another sharp left, to the Ponte de l'Anzolo, Bridge of the Angel. I had come this way just a few days earlier with an earnest English clergyman to show him the fine sculptured angel on Palazzo Soranzo that looks towards the bridge, and I had told him the quaint story of the monkey and the devil associated with it. He had thought the story a foolish example of Papist superstition, and I had said nothing in defence of the angel (or of the Catholic Church). So maybe now I was coming back to make amends. And perhaps I also felt I needed an angel's protection.

But it didn't work. As I passed the first turning left after the bridge I heard an urgent clatter of approaching footsteps from somewhere along the gloomy depths of the alley – and I realised that it led straight back to the tavern. If that figure I had glimpsed on the bridge earlier had been one of Molin's *bravi*, then they could easily have guessed that I might come back this way. Especially if they knew that I was drunk and stupid. And my conversation earlier had perhaps given them an inkling.

Without even stopping to send a word of reproach or of supplication to the angel I broke into a run myself. I guessed that my safest bet was to make towards the lights and bustle of Saint Mark's Square. If nothing else, there would be a troop of *arsenalotti* stationed by the bell-tower.

I was not running as fast as I should, I dimly realised, being hampered by my cloak, which had come unbuckled and was slipping off my left shoulder. I could discard it, I thought – and then rebelled at the idea. Why should I lose the first warm cloak I had ever had (a month's wages) just because a few *bravi* had taken it into their heads to thrash me? I would go down fighting but warm . . .

I could hear their clunking footsteps getting closer as I swivelled right into the broad street at the end of the alley. As I grabbed at the flapping encumbrance I darted one glance back and saw two dim but large shapes lumbering along, one of them already raising a menacing object above his head.

Well, the only alternative to discarding my cloak was to transform it from hindrance to help. And the same applied to the darkness, which seconds ago I had been yearning to emerge from. I ran down the broad street, heading towards the next turning left, which led towards the Square of the Little Lions; I knew I had little chance of reaching the square before they caught up with me, but I did think I could make it to the dark alley itself. And as I ran I loosened the cloak with one hand and with the other clutched at a corner of my tricorne hat. I could already hear the snorting breath of the first man, apparently inches behind me.

I twisted left into the alley, and as I did so I flicked the cloak free from my shoulder with my left hand and with the right jerked off my hat, and then I thrust them both out to one side. I was relying on

vague memories of bull-fights I had seen in Campo San Polo; the men were not bulls, but darkness and surprise might at least momentarily rob them of any human intelligence they might possess.

The first man thudded into the alley and swung his cudgel down upon the black shapes of the hat and cloak. The blow was so vicious that my hat was jerked from my fingers. However, meeting an unexpected lack of solid resistance the man staggered forwards, tumbling on to the cloak. Letting go of it, I was able to jerk the cudgel from his hands as he fell, and as the second man loomed into the alley, I was already swinging it in as menacing an attitude as I could assume.

But then the first man, from his sprawling position, grabbed my legs and I staggered, dropping the cudgel as I instinctively put my arms out to break my fall. I didn't see what happened next, but I can only presume that the second man tripped over his colleague, or perhaps got entangled in my loose cloak, because a second later we were all three on the ground, the two men letting out a series of blasphemous imprecations. If they were *bravi*, they were not very good at it.

Another voice made itself heard, one that I recognised. "Come on, give him what he deserves." It was the slimy man I had been speaking to in the tavern, who was standing at the entrance to the alleyway, at a prudent distant from our floundering figures.

I had managed to get hold of the cudgel I had dropped, which had rolled towards the side of the street, and was able to smash it down on the fingers of the man who was now clutching at my waist. At that point, however, a great blow came down on my shoulder, presumably from the second man, who had somehow got himself upright enough to wield his own cudgel forcefully. I lost hold of mine again and squirmed round to face him. He had struggled to his feet and was looming over me, ready to deliver another blow. I sensed he was still unsteady on his feet and with one hand I scrabbled at my tangled cloak, one corner of which he was standing on. I gave it a sudden jerk and he reeled backwards.

I somehow managed to yank the cloak free from both of them

and with a gait that was midway between a crawl and a stooping run I headed towards the hazy lights of the square at the other end of the alleyway. They were not far behind me, with the slimy man screaming furiously at his two inept henchmen. I emerged into the reassuring open space of the Square of the Little Lions, along the northern flank of the basilica of Saint Mark, and cast just one glance at the comforting red-marble figures of the little lions, their backs rendered shiny by three decades of contact with children's bottoms, as I tore past.

The great expanse of Saint Mark's Square, lit by numerous lanterns, lay ahead of me. As usual the coffee houses were busy and there were still a number of people parading on the Liston, the area between the Merceria and the waterfront Piazzetta. I headed straight towards the great solid mass of the bell-tower, where there was always a cluster of *arsenalotti* on hand to quell any trouble.

I was now yelling at the top of my voice, "Thieves! Murderers! Help!" I had definitely caught people's attention, but it did not yet look as if anyone was going to come to my assistance; most people's reaction seemed to be to shrink away. And I could hear the pounding footsteps of my pursuers getting closer.

I was now among the people parading in their finest clothes on the Liston. Perhaps I should have added "Ragamuffins!" or "Scoundrels wearing clothes from last year!" to my list if I wanted a sharp reaction from this crowd.

But then, just as a hefty hand grabbed my shoulder, I heard the reassuring pounding of urgent feet from the direction of the bell-tower and a clamour of gruff Castello accents.

A few seconds later the two *bravi* and I were surrounded by thickset men, all carrying pikes and all looking even more menacing than the two henchmen. The strolling crowd of the Liston had all drawn back; most of them were in masks, but I could sense an air of disdainful curiosity as they gazed upon this intrusive episode of low-life rowdiness. The slimy man was nowhere to be seen.

Things happened very swiftly after that. We were escorted briskly away from the Liston so as not to cause any further disruption. By

the corner of the basilica's treasury we were disarmed (well, I was frisked, and my volume of Pope's *Iliad* was confiscated, presumably on the grounds that something had to be taken from me, given that the others had had their cudgels removed). Then we were forced to stand with our backs to the crowds and our hands behind our heads, staring at the four mysterious porphyry figures set into the corner of the treasury, while we waited for the *sbirri* to come.

I wondered whether this was standard procedure with felons, with the notion that we would brood on the grim fate of the men depicted by those statues. Legend had it that these curiously conspiratorial figures, each with one hand on a sword and the other on the shoulder of a companion, were Saracens who had attempted to rob the treasury and had been transformed into stone for their pains. As the minutes passed and I felt the steady throbbing of my shoulder where the cudgel had hit me, I began to think that turning into stone wasn't so bad a fate, though I doubted I would attain the dignity of porphyry. And then at last the *sbirri* arrived and the *arsenalotti* handed us and our belongings over to them. I recognised one of them, a thickset bearded man named Piero, who stubbornly refused to acknowledge me. Things are definitely bad when you find yourself being snubbed by a *sbirro*.

About five minutes later I was in a cell, fortunately by myself. Despite my pleas my *Iliad* had not been returned to me, which meant I had nothing better to do than brood on my situation, rub my throbbing shoulder and prepare my story. The fact that I had clearly been running away from the two cudgel-bearing men ought to tell in my favour, I thought. But against this there was the fact that I had brought disruption into the most prestigious place in the city; I should have allowed myself to be discreetly cudgelled senseless in a side street rather than disturb the elegant pomp of the *passeggiata* on the Liston. The authorities would care little which of us was the aggressor and which the victim; quite simply none of us should have been there. The only spectacles allowed in the Piazza were celebratory ones.

Much would also depend on how influential Sior Lucio Molin

was. The very fact that his employee had decided that an insult should be instantly punished with violence suggested either that the slimy man had simply lost all sense of judgement or that he and his employer had little fear of any denunciation I might make. I rather suspected the latter was the case. If so, then the very least that would happen was that I would lose my licence as a *cicerone*.

Would my role as confidential agent be of any help? Probably not; the very last thing the Missier Grande needed was agents who got involved in street brawls. I would not be able to remind the authorities of my former services to the city (minor things, like thwarting an assassination attempt on the Doge), since my role in that whole affair had never been officially recognised, due to the delicate game of power-balancing that was always being played out between the Missier Grande and the Council of Ten. The Missier Grande effectively ran the city's *sbirri* and was responsible for all matters of common criminality; the Council of Ten – or more specifically the three Inquisitors, who were appointed by the Council – were responsible for all matters that involved the security of the state. The Missier Grande had to be very careful not to venture into such matters himself – or, at least, not to let it appear that he was doing so. In particular he had to be very wary about investigating any matters that involved noblemen, since the very fact of so doing could be thought of as a subversive activity, undermining the foundations on which the Venetian Republic was built. I knew, too, that he was reluctant to let the Inquisitors know that he had an English-educated agent on his payroll; it could suggest he was going beyond his area of competence and involving himself in foreign affairs.

It did make me wonder sometimes whether I was worth all the trouble to the Missier Grande; for the last few months I had had little to do for him beyond drawing up reports on some of the gambling houses where foreigners were regularly fleeced (which was how I had come to know about Sior Molin). It had not been difficult work, and, until today, it had never seemed particularly dangerous either. My gloomy feeling now was that the moment my role as agent proved more problematic than useful, the Missier Grande would

simply strike me off his books. That moment looked like being now. And with that I would also lose my licence as *cicerone* and any possibility of supporting myself in Venice.

“Farewell, Lucia,” I said, when I came to this conclusion. I had not seen Lucia, daughter of Fabrizio Busetto, bookseller and friend, for some weeks now; our relations, formerly warm, had become somewhat strained ever since it had become clear that I was continuing to act as a confidential agent. It was not unreasonable on her part; everyone knew that agents played an important role in the way the city functioned, but nobody wanted to have much to do with them; the same, after all, was true of those who raked the shit from the city’s drained canals. The fact that I was only allowed to keep my licence as *cicerone* on condition that I also did some confidential reporting for the Missier Grande had clearly not proved a persuasive enough argument for Lucia.

Until a few weeks ago I had continued to call in occasionally at the bookshop, hoping that my insouciance might help to make her forget the unsavoury side of my life, but although she was courteous enough a certain wariness in her eyes told me that she could never completely keep from wondering whether every word she said was going to end up in a confidential report to be read by inquisitive functionaries of the Missier Grande. And so in the end I had ceased to visit. I will not deny that I continued to foster the secret (and never consciously acknowledged) hope that my absence would stir a spirit of remorse in her; I even occasionally (and wildly) dreamed that I might wake up in the middle of the night to find her by my bed murmuring that she could no longer live without me.