The City of Falling Angels

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PROLOGUE:
The Venice Effect

'Everyone in venice is acting,' Count Girolamo Marcello told me. 'Everyone plays a role, and the role changes. The key to understanding Venetians is rhythm – the rhythm of the lagoon, the rhythm of the water, the tides, the waves . . .'

I had been walking along Calle della Mandola when I ran into Count Marcello. He was a member of an old Venetian family and was considered an authority on the history, the social structure, and especially the subtleties of Venice. As we were both headed in the same direction, I joined him.

'The rhythm in Venice is like breathing,' he said. 'High water, high pressure: tense. Low water, low pressure: relaxed. Venetians are not at all attuned to the rhythm of the wheel. That is for other places, places with motor vehicles. Ours is the rhythm of the Adriatic. The rhythm of the sea. In Venice the rhythm flows along with the tide, and the tide changes every six hours.'

Count Marcello inhaled deeply. 'How do you see a bridge?'

'Pardon me?' I asked. 'A bridge?'

'Do you see a bridge as an obstacle – as just another set of steps to climb to get from one side of a canal to the other? We Venetians do not see bridges as obstacles. To us bridges are transitions. We go over them very slowly. They are part of the rhythm. They are the links between two parts of a theatre, like changes in scenery, or like the progression from Act One of a play to Act Two. Our role changes as we go over bridges. We cross from one reality . . . to another reality. From one street . . . to another street. From one setting . . . to another setting.'

We were approaching a bridge crossing over Rio di San Luca into Campo Manin.

'A *trompe l'oeil* painting,' Count Marcello went on, 'is a painting that is so lifelike it doesn't look like a painting at all. It looks like real life, but of course it is not. It is reality once removed. What, then, is a *trompe l'oeil* painting when it is reflected in a mirror? Reality twice removed?

'Sunlight on a canal is reflected up through a window on to the ceiling, then from the ceiling on to a vase, and from the vase on to a glass, or a silver bowl. Which is the real sunlight? Which is the real reflection?

'What is true? What is not true? The answer is not so simple, because the truth can change. I can change. You can change. That is the Venice effect.'

We descended from the bridge into Campo Manin. Other than having come from the deep shade of Calle della Mandola into the bright sunlight of the open square, I felt unchanged. My role, whatever it was, remained the same as it had been before the bridge. I did not, of course, admit this to Count Marcello. But I looked at him to see if he would acknowledge having undergone any change himself.

He breathed deeply as we walked into Campo Manin. Then, with an air of finality, he said, 'Venetians never tell the truth. We mean precisely the opposite of what we say.'

I

An Evening in Venice

THE AIR STILL SMELT OF charcoal when I arrived in Venice three days after the fire. As it happened, the timing of my visit was purely coincidental. I had made plans, months before, to come to Venice for a few weeks in the off-season in order to enjoy the city without the crush of other tourists.

'If there had been a wind Monday night,' the water-taxi driver told me as we came across the lagoon from the airport, 'there wouldn't be a Venice to come to.'

'How did it happen?' I asked.

The taxi driver shrugged. 'How do all these things happen?'

It was early February, in the middle of the peaceful lull that settles over Venice every year between New Year's Day and Carnival. The tourists had gone, and in their absence the Venice they inhabited had all but closed down. Hotel lobbies and souvenir shops stood virtually empty. Gondolas lay tethered to poles and covered in blue tarpaulin. Unbought copies of the *International Herald Tribune* remained on newsstand racks all day, and pigeons abandoned sparse pickings in St Mark's Square to scavenge for crumbs in other parts of the city.

Meanwhile the other Venice, the one inhabited by Venetians, was as busy as ever – the neighbourhood shops, the vegetable stands, the fish markets, the wine bars. For these few weeks, Venetians could stride through their city without having to squeeze past dense clusters of slow-moving tourists. The city breathed, its pulse quickened. Venetians had Venice all to themselves.

But the atmosphere was subdued. People spoke in hushed, dazed

tones of the sort one hears when there has been a sudden death in the family. The subject was on everyone's lips. Within days I had heard about it in such detail I felt as if I had been there myself.

It happened on Monday evening, 29 January 1996.

Shortly before nine o'clock, Archimede Seguso sat down at the dinner table and unfolded his napkin. Before joining him, his wife went into the living room to lower the curtains, which was her long-standing evening ritual. Signora Seguso knew very well that no one could see in through the windows, but it was her way of enfolding her family in a domestic embrace. The Segusos lived on the third floor of Ca' Capello, a sixteenth-century house in the heart of Venice. A narrow canal wrapped around two sides of the building before flowing into the Grand Canal a short distance away.

Signor Seguso waited patiently at the table. He was eighty-six – tall, thin, his posture still erect. A fringe of wispy white hair and flaring eyebrows gave him the look of a kindly sorcerer, full of wonder and surprise. He had an animated face and sparkling eyes that captivated everyone who met him. If you happened to be in his presence for any length of time, however, your eye would eventually be drawn to his hands.

They were large, muscular hands, the hands of an artisan whose work demanded physical strength. For seventy-five years, Signor Seguso had stood in front of a blazing hot glassworks furnace – ten, twelve, eighteen hours a day – holding a heavy steel pipe in his hands, turning it to prevent the dollop of molten glass at the other end from drooping to one side or the other, pausing to blow into it to inflate the glass, then laying it across his workbench, still turning it with his left hand while, with a pair of tongs in his right hand, pulling, pinching, and coaxing the glass into the shape of graceful vases, bowls, and goblets.

After all those years of turning the steel pipe hour after hour, Signor

Seguso's left hand had moulded itself around the pipe until it became permanently cupped, as if the pipe were always in it. His cupped hand was the proud mark of his craft, and this was why the artist who painted his portrait some years ago had taken particular care to show the curve in his left hand.

Men in the Seguso family had been glassmakers since the fourteenth century. Archimede was the twenty-first generation and one of the greatest of them all. He could sculpt heavy pieces out of solid glass and blow vases so thin and fragile they could barely be touched. He was the first glassmaker ever to see his work honoured with an exhibition in the Doge's Palace in St Mark's Square. Tiffany sold his pieces in its Fifth Avenue store.

Archimede Seguso had been making glass since the age of eleven, and by the time he was twenty, he had earned the nickname 'Mago del Fuoco' (Wizard of Fire). He no longer had the stamina to stand in front of a hot and howling furnace eighteen hours a day, but he worked every day nonetheless, and with undiminished pleasure. On this particular day, in fact, he had risen at his usual hour of 4.30 a.m., convinced as always that the pieces he was about to make would be more beautiful than any he had ever made before.

In the living-room, Signora Seguso paused to look out of the window before lowering the curtain. She noticed that the air had become hazy, and she mused aloud that a winter fog had set in. In response, Signor Seguso remarked from the other room that it must have come in very quickly, because he had seen the quarter moon in a clear sky only a few minutes before.

The living-room window looked across a small canal at the back of the Fenice Opera House, thirty feet away. Rising above it in the distance, some one hundred yards away, the theatre's grand entrance wing appeared to be shrouded in mist. Just as she started to lower the curtain, Signora Seguso saw a flash. She thought it was lightning. Then she saw another flash, and this time she knew it was fire.

'Papa!' she cried out. 'The Fenice is on fire!'

Signor Seguso came quickly to the window. More flames flickered at the front of the theatre, illuminating what Signora Seguso had thought was mist but had in fact been smoke. She rushed to the telephone and dialled 115 for the fire brigade. Signor Seguso went into his bedroom and stood at the corner window, which was even closer to the Fenice than the living-room window.

Between the fire and the Segusos' house lay a jumble of buildings that constituted the Fenice. The part on fire was farthest away, the chaste neoclassical entrance wing with its formal reception rooms, known collectively as the Apollonian rooms. Then came the main body of the theatre with its elaborately rococo auditorium, and finally the vast backstage area. Flaring out from both sides of the auditorium and the backstage were clusters of smaller, interconnected buildings like the one that housed the scenery workshop immediately across the narrow canal from Signor Seguso.

Signora Seguso could not get through to the fire brigade, so she dialled 112 for the police.

The enormity of what was happening outside his window stunned Signor Seguso. The Gran Teatro La Fenice was one of the splendours of Venice; it was arguably the most beautiful opera house in the world, and one of the most significant. The Fenice had commissioned dozens of operas that had premièred on its stage – Verdi's *La Traviata* and *Rigoletto*, Igor Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*. For two hundred years, audiences had delighted in the sumptuous clarity of the Fenice's acoustics, the magnificence of its five tiers of gilt-encrusted boxes, and the baroque fantasy of it all. Signor and Signora Seguso had always taken a box for the season, and over the years they had been given increasingly desirable locations until they finally found themselves next to the royal box.

Signora Seguso had no luck getting through to the police either, and now she was becoming frantic. She called upstairs to the apartment

where her son Gino lived with his wife and their son, Antonio. Gino was still out at the Seguso glass factory in Murano. Antonio was visiting a friend near the Rialto.

Signor Seguso stood silently at his bedroom window, watching as the flames raced across the entire top floor of the entrance wing. He knew that, for all its storeyed loveliness, the Fenice was at this moment an enormous pile of exquisite kindling. Inside a thick shell of Istrian stone lined with brick, the structure was made entirely of wood – wooden beams, wooden floors, wooden walls – richly embellished with wood carvings, sculpted stucco, and papier-mâché, all of it covered with layer upon layer of lacquer and gilt. Signor Seguso was aware, too, that the scenery workshop just across the canal from his house was stocked with solvents and, most worrying of all, cylinders of propane gas that were used for welding and soldering.

Signora Seguso came back into the room to say she had finally spoken to the police.

'They already knew about the fire,' she said. 'They told me we should leave the house at once.' She looked over her husband's shoulder and stifled a scream; the flames had moved closer in the short time she had been away from the window. They were now advancing through the four smaller reception halls towards the main body of the theatre, in their direction.

Archimede Seguso stared into the fire with an appraising eye. He opened the window, and a gust of bitter-cold air rushed in. The wind was blowing to the south-west. The Segusos were due west of the theatre, however, and Signor Seguso calculated that if the wind did not change direction or pick up strength, the fire would advance towards the other side of the Fenice rather than in their direction.

'Now, Nandina,' he said softly, 'stay calm. We're not in any danger.'

The Segusos' house was only one of many buildings close to the Fenice. Except for Campo San Fantin, a small plaza at the front of the theatre, the Fenice was hemmed in by old and equally flammable

buildings, many of them attached to it or separated from it by only four or five feet. This was not at all unusual in Venice, where building space had always been at a premium. Seen from above, Venice resembled a jigsaw puzzle of terracotta rooftops. Passages between some of the buildings were so narrow one could not walk through them with an open umbrella. It had become a speciality of Venetian burglars to escape from the scene of a crime by leaping from roof to roof. If the fire in the Fenice were able to make the same sort of leap, it would almost certainly destroy a sizeable swath of Venice.

The Fenice itself was dark. It had been closed five months for renovations and was due to reopen in a month. The canal along its rear façade was also closed – empty – having been sealed off and drained so work crews could dredge the silt and sludge from it and repair its walls for the first time in forty years. The canal between the Segusos' building and the back of the Fenice was now a deep, muddy gulch with a tangle of exposed pipes and a few pieces of heavy machinery sitting in puddles at the bottom. The empty canal would make it impossible for fireboats to reach the Fenice, and, worse than that, it would deprive them of a source of water. Venetian firemen depended on water pumped directly from the canals to put out fires. The city had no system of fire hydrants.

The Fenice was now ringed by a tumult of shouts and running footsteps. Tenants, routed from their houses by the police, crossed paths with patrons coming out of the Ristorante Antico Martini. A dozen bewildered guests rolled suitcases out of the Hotel La Fenice, asking directions to the Hotel Saturnia, where they had been told to go. Into their midst, a wild-eyed woman wearing only a nightgown came stumbling from her house into Campo San Fantin screaming hysterically. She threw herself to the ground in front of the theatre, flailing her arms and rolling on the pavement. Several waiters came out of the Antico Martini and led her inside.

Two fireboats managed to navigate to a water-filled canal a short

distance from the Fenice. The hoses were not long enough to reach round the intervening buildings, however, so the firemen dragged them through the kitchen window at the back of the Antico Martini and out through the dining room into Campo San Fantin. They aimed their nozzles at flames burning furiously in a top-floor window of the theatre, but the water pressure was too low. The arc of water barely reached the windowsill. The fire went on leaping and taunting and sucking up great turbulent currents of air that set the flames snapping like brilliant red sails in a violent wind.

Several policemen struggled with the massive front door of the Fenice, but to no avail. One of them drew his pistol and fired three shots at the lock. The door opened. Two firemen rushed in and disappeared into a dense white wall of smoke. Moments later they came running out. 'It's too late,' said one. 'It's burning like straw.'

The wail of sirens now filled the air as police and firemen raced up and down the Grand Canal in motorboats, spanking up huge butterfly wings of spray as they bounced through the wakes of other boats. About an hour after the first alarm, the city's big fire launch pulled up at the landing stage behind Haig's Bar. Its high-powered rigs would at last be able to pump water the two hundred yards from the Grand Canal to the Fenice. Dozens of firemen ran hoses from the fire launch into Campo Santa Maria del Giglio, feverishly coupling sections together, but it was immediately apparent that the hoses were of different gauges. Leaks sprayed from the couplings, but the firemen carried the linked hoses, such as they were, up to the rooftops around the Fenice anyway. They directed half of the water on to the theatre in an attempt to contain the fire and the rest of it on to adjacent buildings. Fire Commandant Alfio Pini had already made a momentous strategic decision: the Fenice was lost; save the city.

When the lights went out, Count Girolamo Marcello was mid-sentence in a conversation over dinner with his son on the top floor of his palace

less than a minute's walk from the front of the Fenice. Earlier in the day, Count Marcello had learned that the exiled Russian poet and Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky had died suddenly of a heart attack, at fifty-five, in New York. Brodsky had been a passionate lover of Venice and a friend and house guest of Marcello's. It was while he was staying in Marcello's palace, in fact, that Brodsky had written his last book, *Watermark*, a lyrical reflection on Venice. That afternoon Marcello had spoken by phone to Brodsky's widow, Maria, and they had discussed the possibility of burying Brodsky in Venice. Marcello knew that this would not be easily arranged. Every available plot on the burial island of San Michele had been spoken for years ago. It was generally understood that any new arrival, even a native Venetian, would be dug up in ten years and moved to a common burial site farther out in the lagoon. But for a non-Venetian Jewish atheist, gaining approval for even a temporary burial would be a quest fraught with obstacles. Still, there had been notable exceptions. Igor Stravinsky had been buried on San Michele, and so had Sergei Diaghilev and Ezra Pound. They had all been buried in the Anglican and Greek Orthodox section, and all would be allowed to remain there in perpetuity. So there was reason to hope that Brodsky could be buried there, too, and this was on Marcello's mind when the lights went out.

Father and son sat in darkness for a while, expecting the lights to come back on. Then they heard the sirens, lots of them, many more than usual.

'Let's go up and see what's happened,' said Marcello. They headed upstairs to the wooden deck on the roof, the *altana*, and as soon as they opened the door, they saw the raging fire.

Marcello decided they should leave the house at once. They descended the stairs, feeling their way in the darkness, Marcello wondering if the six-hundred-year-old palace was doomed. If it was, the most impressive private library in Venice would disappear with it. Marcello's library occupied most of the second floor. It was an

architectural delight, a high-ceilinged space complete with a wrap-around wooden gallery that could be reached only by climbing a secret stairway hidden behind a panel in the wall. The floor-to-ceiling shelves held forty thousand volumes of private and state papers, some of them more than a thousand years old. The collection amounted to a treasure trove of Venetian history, and Marcello regularly made it available to scholars. He himself spent long hours sitting in a thronelike black leather armchair perusing the archive, especially the papers of the Marcello family, which was one of the oldest in Venice. Marcello's ancestors included a fifteenth-century doge, or head of state. The Marcellos had, in fact, been among the families that built the Fenice and owned it until just before the Second World War, when the municipality of Venice took it over.

Marcello walked to the edge of Campo San Fantin and found himself standing in the midst of a crowd that included the entire city council, which had rushed in a body from Ca' Farsetti, the town hall, where it had been in an evening session. Marcello was a familiar figure around town, with his bald head and close-cropped grey beard. The press frequently sought him out for comment, knowing they could count on a frank, often provocative quote or two. He had once described himself to an interviewer as 'inquisitive, restless, eclectic, impulsive and capricious'. It was the last two of these behavioural quirks that asserted themselves as he stood in Campo San Fantin looking at the burning opera house.

'What a shame,' he said. 'It's gone. I suppose I will never see it again. The reconstruction will take so long, I'm sure I won't be alive when it's finished.' This remark was nominally directed to the person next to him, but it was really intended for the ears of a handsome man with a dark beard in his mid-fifties who was standing a few feet away: the mayor of Venice, Massimo Cacciari. Mayor Cacciari was a former Communist, a professor of philosophy and architecture at the University of Venice, and Italy's most highly regarded contemporary

philosopher. Being mayor automatically made him president of the Fenice, which meant he had been responsible for the security of the theatre and would now be in charge of rebuilding it. Marcello's remark clearly implied that, in his opinion, neither Cacciari nor his left-wing government had the competence to do it. Mayor Cacciari gazed at the fire with a look of deep despair, unfazed one way or the other by Marcello's obliquely worded taunt.

'But I would suggest,' Marcello went on, 'that if they want to rebuild the place as it was in its prime – and by that I mean as a social place, a meeting place – they should make it into a great discotheque for young people.'

An old man standing in front of Marcello turned around, aghast, tears rolling down his cheeks. 'Girolamo!' he said. 'How can you say such a thing? Anyway, who knows what the hell young people will want five years from now?'

A deafening crash resounded in the depths of the Fenice. The great crystal chandelier had fallen to the floor.

'You have a point,' Marcello replied, 'but, as everybody knows, going to the opera has always been a social thing. You can even see it in the architecture. Only a third of the seats are positioned so they have a good view of the stage. The rest, particularly the boxes, are really best for looking at the audience. The arrangement is purely social.'

Marcello spoke with a gentle bemusement and without any trace of cynicism. It seemed to tickle him that anyone could think that generations of opera-goers, like the Marcellos, had been drawn to the opera by anything as lofty as music or culture – Benedetto Marcello, the eighteenth-century composer and one of Girolamo Marcello's forebears, notwithstanding. Throughout its existence, the Fenice had been hallowed ground in the social landscape of Venice, and Girolamo Marcello had a broad knowledge of Venetian social history. He was, in fact, regarded as something of an authority on the subject.

'In the old days,' he said, 'the private boxes had curtains you could

close, even during the performance. My grandfather loved going to the opera, but he didn't give a damn about music. He would open the curtains only for highlights on the stage. He would say, "Silence! Now we have the aria!" and he would pull open the curtains and applaud . . . "Good! Lovely! Well done!" Then he would close the curtains again, and a servant would come from the house with a basket of chicken and some wine. Opera was just a form of relaxation, and anyway it was cheaper to take a box at the opera than heat a whole palace for an evening.'

Suddenly another enormous boom shook the ground. The floors in the entrance wing had collapsed, one on to another. People standing at the edge of the *campo* leaped backward just as the roof of the entrance wing fell, sending flames and burning debris high into the air. Marcello went back upstairs to his rooftop *altana*, this time fortified with a bottle of grappa, a video camera, and a bucket of water in case any of the airborne embers should happen to land on his roof.

Within minutes – as Girolamo Marcello's video camera whirred and clicked, as Archimede Seguso stared in silence from his bedroom window, as hundreds of Venetians watched from rooftops, and as thousands more all over Italy followed live television coverage of the fire – the roof of the auditorium collapsed with a thunderous boom and a volcanic eruption that shot flaming debris 150 feet into the air. A powerful updraught sent chunks of burning embers, some as big as shoeboxes, arcing over Venice like comets.

Shortly after eleven, a helicopter appeared above St Mark's, swung low over the mouth of the Grand Canal, and scooped up a tankful of water. Then it soared aloft again, banked over the Fenice and, to cheers from rooftops, dropped its water. A hissing plume of steam and smoke coiled up from the Fenice, but the fire kept burning undiminished. The helicopter turned and flew back to the Grand Canal to load up again.

It suddenly occurred to Girolamo Marcello that his wife, Lesa, who was out of town, might hear about the fire before he had a chance to tell

her that her family and her house were safe. He came down from the roof to telephone her.

Countess Marcello worked for Save Venice, the American non-profit organization devoted to raising money for restoring Venetian art and architecture. Save Venice was headquartered in New York. Lesa Marcello was the director of its Venice office. Over the past thirty years, Save Venice had restored scores of paintings, frescos, mosaics, statues, ceilings, and building façades. Recently, Save Venice had restored the Fenice's painted curtain, at a cost of $100,000.

Save Venice had become a hugely popular charity in America, largely because it was set up to be, in a sense, a participatory charity. Save Venice would organize event-filled, four-day galas in Venice in late summer during which, for three thousand dollars a person, subscribers could attend elegant lunches, dinners, and balls in private villas and palaces not open to the public.

In winter Save Venice kept the spirit alive by mounting a fund-raising ball in New York. Lesa Marcello had flown to New York earlier in the week to attend the winter ball. This year it was to be a masked ball, based on the theme of Carnival, and it would be held in the Rainbow Room on the sixty-fifth floor of the Rockefeller Center. As he picked up the telephone to call his wife, Girolamo Marcello suddenly remembered that the ball was scheduled for this very night.

The towers of Manhattan glittered in the late-afternoon sun as Lesa Marcello made her way to the telephone through a confusion of people rushing to finish decorating the Rainbow Room. The interior designer John Saladino was fuming. The unions had allowed him only three hours to install his decorations, so he had been forced to deploy the entire domestic staff of his twenty-three-room house in Connecticut, plus twelve people from his office. He intended to transform the Rainbow Room's art-deco ballroom into his version of the Venetian Lagoon by nightfall.

'The Rainbow Room is dominated by a cabal of union-clad people,' he said, loud enough to be overheard by some of those very people. 'Their role in life is to make everyone around them miserable.' He glared at a foursome of slow-moving electricians. 'I'm decorating eighty-eight tables so that each one will represent an island in the lagoon. Over each table we're suspending a cluster of silver, helium-filled balloons that will reflect candlelight from the table below, creating the effect of a glowing *baldacchino*.' Mr Saladino looked around imperiously. 'I wonder if anyone within the sound of my voice knows what a *baldacchino* is?' He was clearly not expecting an answer from any of the people inflating balloons or making centrepieces, or from the technicians loudly testing sound levels on Peter Duchin's bandstand, or from the two jugglers rehearsing their act, clomping around on stilts, tossing balls in the air and spinning plates on the ends of their fingers.

'A *baldacchino*!' said a barrel-chested man, standing in front of an easel by the bandstand. He had long white hair, an aquiline nose, and a silk scarf hanging loosely around his neck. 'A *baldacchino* is our word for "canopy",' he said. Then he shrugged and went back to setting up his easel.

This was Ludovico De Luigi, one of the best-known contemporary Venetian artists. He had been brought to New York by Save Venice to help raise money at the ball tonight. In the course of the evening, he would execute a watercolour that would later be auctioned off for the benefit of Save Venice.

Ludovico De Luigi was a man of supreme self-confidence and dramatic flair. His futuristic, Dalíesque paintings tended towards the metaphysical-surreal. Typically they were spectral landscapes of familiar Venetian buildings in stunning juxtapositions – the domed Santa Maria della Salute Church as an oil rig in the middle of an ocean, or St Mark's Square as a body of water with a huge Polaris submarine surfacing and ploughing ominously towards the basilica. Though verging on kitsch, De Luigi's works were technically brilliant and always eye-catching.

In Venice he was known as much for his public antics as for his art. On one occasion, he had been granted permission to display his sculpture of a horse in St Mark's Square and, without telling the authorities, he invited a notorious member of the Italian parliament to attend: Ilona Staller, a Radical deputy from Rome, better known to fans of her porn movies as 'Cicciolina'. She arrived at St Mark's by gondola, topless, and climbed up on to the horse, proclaiming herself a living work of art surmounting an inanimate one. Parliamentary immunity protected Cicciolina from prosecution for obscene acts in public, so De Luigi was charged instead. He told the presiding judge, who happened to be a woman, that he had not expected Cicciolina to take her clothes off.

'But, knowing Miss Staller's history, Signor De Luigi,' the judge said, 'couldn't you *imagine* she would take her clothes off?'

'Your Honour, I am an artist. I have a lively imagination. I can imagine *you* taking your clothes off right here in court. But I don't expect you to do it.'

'Signor De Luigi,' said the judge, 'I, too, have an imagination, and I can imagine sending you to jail for five years for contempt of court.' In the end, she gave him a sentence of five months in jail, which was quashed in a general amnesty a short time later. In any case, tonight in the Rainbow Room, Ludovico De Luigi was going to paint a picture of the Miracoli Church as a tribute to Save Venice's current, and most ambitious, restoration project. As he went back to mixing colours on his palette, Lesa Marcello picked up the telephone and turned towards the windows and the view of Manhattan.

Countess Marcello was a dark-haired woman with a quiet manner and an expression of infinite patience. She pressed her free hand against her ear to shut out the noise and heard Girolamo Marcello say that the Fenice had caught fire and was burning out of control. 'It's gone,' he said. 'There is nothing anybody can do. But at least we are all safe, and so far the fire has not spread.'