

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 27

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 East Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, \$2.50; Canada, \$2.75; elsewhere, \$3.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 86 Strand, W. C. 2, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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REGISTERED IN GREAT BRITAIN



WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"He looked carefully to the priming in the pom."



Son of Satan

By ARLTON EADIE

*'A weird story of Venice in carnival time, and the infatuation of
a lovely maid for her golem lover*

MASKS—mirth—music! The revels of the famous Carnival of Venice were at their giddy height.

The swelling domes and lofty campaniles of the fairy-like City of the Sea were

delicately etched against the faint moonlight which trembled on the pearl-tinted beaches of the distant Lido. The light from thousands of perfumed wax candles, reflected from the mirror-lined walls of great gilded salons, escaped through

the tall arched windows to cast ingots of liquid gold on the rippling waters of the multitude of canals. Strings of lanterns, myriad-hued as the iridescence of fireflies' wings, danced and quivered on the gondolas that threaded their mazy way along the crowded lagoon, turning its waters to a fairy carpet of ever changing colors.

The whole city reeled with frolic, rocked with merry laughter. Songs and jests were on every lip. Every face was masked, for it was the gayest, maddest holiday of the year 1704, a time when the city that had once been hailed as Queen of the Adriatic was content to become the Mecca of Pleasure for the whole world; and the mask was not only tolerated, but compulsory on those who fared abroad during King Carnival's reign of revelry.

Night had fallen unheeded on the merry throng. Well it might, for night was being turned into day. For the moment, the stern and inexorable figure of Father Time was thrust from every mind. The sun sank but to make a more effective background for the illuminations and fireworks, the shrouding darkness a more convenient setting for amorous adventure.

On the balcony of the Palazzo Canigiani, overlooking the Grand Canal, yet far enough above it to be aloof and secluded from the crowd of boats, the Contessa Lisalda reclined on a pile of silken cushions, listening with languid indifference to the flood of fervid eloquence which poured from the lips of the young nobleman who knelt at her feet.

"Donna Lisalda, *vissere mie*"—even in the depth of his passion Martino di Orselo could not rid his voice of its customary drawl of affectation—"does not your own heart tell you that it is no idle fancy which has drawn me to your side this night?"

There was a slight arching of the finely penciled eyebrows, a sudden widening

of the amber eyes. Save for these signs of half-ironical surprize Lisalda's beautiful features retained the stony, unfeeling immobility of some flawless marble statue.

"Certes, noble *Signor*," there was a note of mockery in the full, rich voice. "Were I to rely on my heart for the desired information, Holy Week—nay, Christmas itself—might come and find me no wiser. So I fain must remain in ignorance of the reason why you have honored my poor dwelling with your august presence."

It would seem that the meanest intelligence could not fail to perceive the sarcasm, almost amounting to contempt, which lay in her words. But the patrician wits of the foppish Martino were none of the keenest at the best of times, and just at that moment he was so filled with a sense of his own dignity and importance that he would scarcely have credited the fact that anyone—even the proud beauty who had all Venice at her feet—would have the hardihood, not only to reject his suit, but to make fun of him as well.

The maiden was coy—so ran his complacent thoughts—well might she be, with the leader of Venetian fashion at her feet! A little fire and ardor, and the battle would be won: the fairest maid, the richest heiress in Venice would melt gracefully into his arms.

Throwing back the fine lace ruffle at his wrist, the better to display the costly jewel which gleamed on his little finger, Martino di Orselo placed his left hand on his brocaded vest on the spot where he imagined his heart to be situated. His right hand was raised dramatically in a gesture that he had seen used by an actor at the San Cristomo playhouse.

"It is your beauty that has lured me to you, Lisalda, your peerless loveliness and my desire to win you for my wife. Body of Venus, but you are indeed the fairest of your sex!"

"Indeed? Truly I thank you for your good taste, my Lord of Orselo." Her red lips rippled back in a smile which nevertheless showed but little indication of melting tenderness. "Haply your compliment was well meant—though it may be somewhat lacking in originality." She glanced aside at her reflection in one of the mirrors as she carefully rearranged a straying tendril of the Titian hair which crowned her like a veil of fire. "Surely you have not deserted your friends at the revels simply to assure me that I am not withered and ill-favored? Certes, men tell me that by words and looks a hundred times a day!"

"*Cospetto*, they were blind else!" he burst out, jerking abruptly to his feet. "But a truce to empty compliments, since whatever my poor tongue can utter must sound stale in the ears of one so accustomed to homage as you. So hear a plain truth, unadorned with flowers of speech. I love you, Lisalda, and desire you for my wife. How say you?"

THERE was a long silence as he stood gazing down at the perfect profile of her averted face. Floating through the casement came the sounds of distant laughter and the passionate throbbing of guitars from one of the gondolas as it stole past through the glimmering dusk. The melody swelled louder, then began to die in the distance, but still Lisalda della Canigiani spoke no word. Not until the last dying throb had mingled with the myriad noises of the care-free night did she raise her eyes of flecked amber, tiger-like yet strangely alluring, so that they gazed straight into his.

"Think me not unmindful of the great honor that you have done me in asking me to be your wife, Signor Martino. But, alas! it is an honor which I must decline to accept."

"Decline!" He echoed the word va-

cantly, in the tone of one who sees the impossible happening. In that moment of stunned surprize he found it hard to believe his ears. Decline? Refuse him? *him*—the richest, the noblest, the most eligible young bachelor in Venice? Surely she could not be in earnest! Her refusal must be some freakish jest, tuned to the mad mood of carnival-time!

Desperately the eyes of the curled and scented dandy searched the face of the girl he loved. And as he looked, he tasted the bitterness of defeat. There was no hint of playful coyness in the proud carriage of her head, no sign of secret mirth in the firm line of her scarlet lips to show that they had but jested when they had dashed his hopes to the ground.

He turned on his heel and caught up his mask and *velada*—the thin black mantle under which everyone from Doge to beggar concealed his identity during the Carnival. Then, with the ceremonious gallantry of the day, he bowed low and raised Lisalda's hand to his lips.

"*Addio*, fair charmer, since you have decreed it must be so," he hid the baffled rage in his heart with a smile and an affected drawl. "May I at least have the satisfaction of learning the name of the lucky swain who has supplanted—or perhaps I should say, forestalled—me in your affections?"

The light glinted on her radiant hair as she shook her head.

"Nay, *Signor*," she smiled, but her eyes were somber and sincere. "If it be any solace to your wounded heart, you may rest assured that no man has yet awakened love in my own."

"No man?" he asked quickly. "Then I live again, for that means I still have hope?"

Again she shook her head.

"Then abandon your hope, that it may die quicker and more mercifully than if it lingered," she answered coldly. "Nevc-

will my heart feel the throb of love until I meet the man who fulfills my idea of a fitting mate for me."

"So you await the coming of the ideal lover?" His voice held a sneer which he did not attempt to conceal. "Your fancy soars far above poor imperfect humanity, that you must needs create a paragon of a creature of your own imagining? But what if this perfect suitor does not materialize?"

"He will come—I feel it—I know it!"

"*Corpo di Bacco!* May I be there to see him when he does! Right gladly would I learn the type of perfection that is conjured up by the fond day-dreams of a love-sick maiden!"

"I will tell you, Signor Martino." Her head was turned away, her eyes looking dreamily out into the starry splendor of the night. "When he comes—as come he must some day—he will be tall yet graceful, strong yet tender, handsome without vanity, wise but not lacking in witty conversation. But above all he will be constant. His heart will turn to mine with the unswerving allegiance of the compass-needle to the pole."

"By the bones of San' Marco, *Illustrissima*, you draw the line devilishly high in the matter of this phantom lover of yours!"

She lifted her white shoulders in a tiny shrug.

"I ask for no better epitaph to be graven on my tomb," she returned proudly. "And it were well that you should bear the fact well in mind. Donna Lisalda d'Canigiani draws the line high—and draws it fast. And it is far above the head of Signor Martino di Orselo!"

"Then may your quest be fortunate, *madonna!*" He ground the words out savagely as he caught up his three-cornered hat and settled his mask in position. Then with a curt "*Addio!*" he was gone.

AS THE masked cavalier emerged from the door of the Palazzo half a dozen gondoliers, all eager to serve so lordly a patron, caused their boats to converge toward the landing-stage as though drawn by invisible strings. Martino thrust aside the black velvet folds of the *felze* which shrouded the windows of the tiny cabin of the nearest gondola and threw himself upon the cushions.

"Whither, *Sior Maschera?*" the gondolier asked; for the mask was something more than a mere disguise in Venice. It was an incognito, rigidly to be observed by high and low. Even had the man been aware of the identity of his noble passenger he would not have dared to address him otherwise than by the title "Sir Mask." Name, rank, identity itself, were hidden under the scrap of silk that concealed the erstwhile subjects of King Carnival.

Not until the man had repeated his question did Martino rouse himself from the reverie of his enraged and bitter reflections.

"Whither? Oh, anywhere—to the Devil if you like!" he answered impatiently. "This night I have tried to embrace an iceberg, and my bones are still frozen to their marrow!" He tossed a *soldo* into the fellow's ready cap. "Ply your oar briskly, and carry me where I can thaw myself in the hottest hell you know of!"

The man, a gray-haired ruffian, wise in his generation, grinned as he pocketed the coin.

"What say you to the *festa* on the Piazzetta of San' Marco?" he asked with a leer. "There all feet are ready to dance to Cupid's tune, and never an iceberg will you find——"

"To it then," the *signor* interrupted, with a harsh laugh. "Let those embrace phantoms who will—I want to jostle elbows with real flesh and blood!"

The gondolier spat on his horny palms

and grasped his long oar. Presently the light craft was threading its way beneath the arch of the Rialto Bridge, toward where the two domes of Santa Maria della Salute marked the end of the Grand Canal. The open paved space on the other side of the waterway was their destination.

Alighting from the gondola, Martino di Orselo found himself in a pandemonium of noise and merriment well calculated to make the saddest mortal forget his troubles. Stretching along the arched façade of the Doge's Palace, past the five great doors of the Cathedral of St. Mark, a mushroom growth of tents, stalls and booths had sprung up in the Square. The din was incessant; trumpets blared, fiddles squeaked, drums beat, every showman strove with the full force of his leather lungs to attract the attention of the passing throng to the pictured marvels which hung before the various booths as an indication of what might be seen within upon payment of the modest entrance fee.

It seemed as if the whole world had been ransacked to bring such an orgy of freaks and wonders together. Cheek by jowl were Indian jugglers, Ethiopian giants, tame lions, bears that drilled like soldiers with pike and musket, Arabian dancing-girls whose slender, dark-skinned bodies, supple as snakes, performed contortions which awakened more than wonder in the breasts of the beholders. A sleek, glib-tongued rascal pretended to draw teeth painlessly—with a lusty drummer stationed beside him on the platform to drown the victim's cries. A Spanish quack doctor, in threadbare academic robes and a full-bottomed wig very much out of curl, sold phials of the veritable Elixir of Life at what seemed an absurdly low price. A wrinkled hag in Egyptian dress held up a greasy pack of cards as she offered with shrill insistence to tell

the fortunes of the bevy of girls who, half fascinated, half fearful, clustered in a semi-circle round the door of her patched and tattered tent.

"Come on, my pretties, don't be backward in coming forward," she cried coaxingly. "Who wants to know what the future has in store? Ah, even without cutting the cards I can see there's rich and handsome husbands waiting for some of you at the crossroads! Wouldn't you like to know which of you are the lucky ones? Then step inside and let old Mother Vengoldisia tell you. I'm here at your service, dearies, for whatever trifle you like to drop in the box as you go out—it's written in the stars that you'll never feel the want of what you give to Mother Vengoldisia. She's the seventh daughter of a seventh son, and nothing's hid from her. Forewarned is forearmed, they say, so you'd better know what's coming to you, so's you can seize your fortune with both hands as it gallops past on the dark horse. So don't miss your chance through being shy. Step inside, my pretty maids. One at the time, and first come first served."

Martino di Orselo, hovering in idle curiosity on the fringe of the crowd, smiled skeptically beneath his mask as he listened to the harangue. He lived in a superstitious age, it was true, but the spectacle of this unwashed vagrant claiming to be omniscient evoked only amusement in his educated mind. But, whatever her knowledge of the future might amount to, it was at least clear that she possessed a very comprehensive knowledge of human nature. Her speech, short as it was, had cunningly touched the deepest chords of the human heart: hope of gain—fear of losing it—and above all the prospect of satisfying the craving to know the unknowable, which is as abiding in humanity as life itself.

"A smooth-tongued rogue," was his

mental comment as, with a shrug of his cloaked shoulders, he made to turn away.

THE glance of Vengoldisia's beady eyes, darting here and there among the crowd in search of a likely customer, came to rest as they fixed on the masked profile of the young cavalier. She darted toward him, the crowd falling back to give her passage with a respect that was not unmixed with dread.

"One moment, noble *signor*. A word in your ear, with your gracious permission."

Arrested by the urgency of the croaking whisper, Martino swung round. A tolerant laugh came from his lips as he looked down at the bent figure of the self-styled sorceress.

"I fear you've brought your wares to the wrong market, dame," he said with a shake of his head. "There is no beautiful heiress hastening to greet *me* at the cross-roads!"

A gap-toothed grin deepened the wrinkles of the dusky face.

"Perchance she goes to meet another—who is more difficult to find!"

The cryptic words fitted in so deftly with his recent interview that Martino found himself regarding the shrunken features with a new and deeper interest.

"You speak strangely confident for a wandering woman of Egypt——" He broke off with another laugh, as though at his own credulity. "Pshaw! perhaps 'tis not so strange that one of your random shots should have found the mark."

The gypsy came closer, sinking her voice to a whisper little louder than a breath.

"It were stranger still that one so well-favored and highly born as you should sue in vain——"

He started violently.

"You know me?" he asked in amaze-

ment. "Can those bleared old eyes penetrate a silken mask?"

"Not my eyes—my inner understanding—the gift that is the only heritage of my despised race." The clutch of her claw-like hand tightened on his arm. "You are the Signor Mart——"

"Hush! no names!" He glanced round, acutely conscious of a listening lull among the bystanders. "If you must address me, call me 'Mask'."

"So be it, *Sior Maschera*," she answered with what sounded like sardonic emphasis. "After all, is it not a fitting title for all men? Are not all faces—aye, and all tongues!—mere masks to hide their owners' real feelings and desires? You, *Signorino*, although you affect to deride my powers, are you not burning with impatience to hear more? Are you not wondering how much I really know—and whence comes my knowledge? I can read your desires even before they form themselves in your own mind."

She drew him farther away from the curious crowd and went on rapidly:

"Rest content, *Eccellenze*, the desired knowledge shall be yours this very night. But this is no place for such confidences. The walls of my tent are thin and tattered, and I would speak of matters which, did but the faintest echo of their import reach the Inquisitors of the Holy Office, would bring us both to the faggot-pile and the stake."

"Where then?" The words seemed to come from his lips without conscious effort.

"Meet me at midnight at the *Traghetto della Madonetta*. A gondola will be waiting there to bear us to a place where I can safely reveal a plan whereby the proud maid who now spurns your suit shall be compelled to creep meekly to your embrace."

"You are indeed a mighty magician if you can accomplish that!" Martino re-

turned gloomily. "I will hear your plan—but I promise nothing—yet. I have tarried here too long already. Till midnight, *addio!*"

He drew the folds of his cloak closer round him and plunged into the crowd of noisy revelers.

THE deep-toned chimes of the great bell on the clock-tower of the Piazza San Marco were booming forth under the hammer strokes of the mechanical figures which flanked it, as Martino di Orselo turned into the narrow, unlighted street which, running between the towering walls of two ancient palaces, gave access to the *Traghetto della Madonetta*.

Usually these *traghetti*, or landing-stages for the gondolas, are situated in the most frequented parts of the city, but the one that bore the name of "The Little Madonna" was but little used even at the busiest time of day. Now it was utterly deserted and, save for the feeble gleam of the taper which some pious hands had placed before the small statue which gave the landing-place its name, shrouded in complete darkness.

Scarcely had Martino set foot on the creaking wooden steps, before a gondola, its sable hull scarcely visible against the surrounding gloom, glided silently in-shore until it grazed the weed-covered piles.

"Enter!" invited a croaking voice from the impenetrable darkness beneath the *felze*.

Before complying, Martino cast a quick glance at the gondolier who stood at the stern, resting on the long, single oar with which he propelled the boat. By the dim rays of the votive candle at the shrine, Martino caught a glimpse of a face and figure so deformed, gnarled and repulsive that they might have belonged to the dread ferryman, Charon himself.

"Who is this man?" Martino asked suspiciously.

"Fear not. He will not betray you," Vengoldisia laughed back. "He is dumb."

"Where is our destination?" the young man asked, still hesitating.

"Near at hand, yet far enough distant to be safe from prying eyes," was the cryptic reply. "Time presses! Be pleased to enter."

Shrugging his shoulders, and reflecting that his youth and strength would prove a match for his two aged fellow voyagers if it came to a display of physical violence, Martino stepped over the low gunwale and seated himself by the side of the Egyptian woman. He was careful, however, to place the silver hilt of his smallsword in such a position as to make it handy for quick drawing should the occasion warrant it. Venice in the year 1704 was by no means a city where anyone could feel entirely at ease when taking a midnight trip in strange company to an unknown destination. It was an age when mysterious, weighted sacks were thrust from unlighted casements, to fall with a sullen splash into the dark waters of the canal; when the bravo's dagger and the poison cup were recognized resources of statesmanship.

Nor was the course taken by the gondolier calculated to allay the misgivings of a nervous passenger. Avoiding the main canals, he threaded a devious course through a maze of narrow, evil-smelling waterways, away from the stately palaces and open squares, into the very heart of the oldest part of the city, inhabited by the poorest of the poor.

"You have a strange notion of a secluded rendezvous for the discussion of secrets!" He broke the long silence with the sarcastic observation as the boat passed through a perfect rookery of low-class houses.

"Patience, *Signor*," his guide coun-

seled. "The place for which we are bound is lonely enough to satisfy the solitude of a hermit."

As she spoke, the gondola rounded a sharp bend. The next moment it had glided out into the bright moonlight of the open sea, its fretted prow pointing straight toward a solitary tower which seemed to rise sheer from the silvery water.

Martino gave a cry of mingled surprize and recognition as his eyes fell on the grim, ancient pile.

"The Lupa?" he gasped.

The woman nodded. "Is it not a fitting place where perilous words may be spoken—with naught but the rats and sea-gulls to overhear?"

Martino sat silent, musing. The Lupa, the "Tower of the She-wolf", bore a sinister reputation—was, in fact, said to be the abode of evil spirits. It had been built, when the vigor of the war-like republic was at its height, as part of the outlying fortifications of Venice. But that was in the days when the Winged Lion of Saint Mark had been a lion indeed, ready to meet every attack whether from land or sea. Times had changed since then; the sun of Venice was fast setting in the sea from which it first arose. Long years of peaceful prosperity and luxury had sapped the fighting-spirit of the descendants of the rugged mariners who had made their insignificant island state a power to be feared, whose cannon had thundered at the walls of Byzantium and Constantinople.

The Tower of the Lupa had been allowed to fall into ruin. Incredible as it may sound, its guns had been sold by a corrupt general to the very Turks they had formerly defied. And now the ancient fortress stood derelict and forsaken, a fitting monument and symbol of the glory that had passed never to return.

What manner of secret was about to

be revealed to him within its sea-girt walls?

The gondolier, in spite of his age, was not lacking in strength and skill. He deftly rounded the shoulder of the great bastion and with a dozen sweeps of his oar brought the light craft neatly alongside a narrow platform of stone, which terminated in a flight of steps leading to a doorway that now gaped wide to every wind of heaven.

VENGOLDISIA sprang lightly ashore with the assured step of one who treads familiar ground. Martino, all eagerness now that he was fairly entered on his adventure, followed hard at her heels. They passed beneath a crumbling arch, along a short vaulted passage, down a flight of stairs which seemed to delve deep into the living heart of the rock on which the Tower was built.

Martino felt the swirl of air as another door, unseen in the inky darkness, swung open at the woman's touch; he heard the rasp of rings on a metal rod as a heavy curtain was drawn aside.

The sudden blaze of brilliant light within almost blinded him for a moment. He blinked, rubbed his eyes and stared, and as the scene before him grew clear in every ghastly detail, a great wave of superstitious dread fastened like an icy hand upon him.

The hall—for its huge proportions made it worthy of that name—was considerably larger than the tower which stood above. Indeed, its loftiness and spacious width, together with the number of steps which he had descended to reach it, made Martino suspect that it must lie well below the bed of the shallow sea which surrounded the lonely rock. His suspicion was fully confirmed when, even as he stood transfixed in that moment of surprize, he heard, muffled and dulled

like a far-away drum, the slow beating of the waves on the shore overhead.

The huge room was, naturally, absolutely windowless; but it was plain that some cunning system of ventilation amply made up for the deficiency. The numerous lamps burnt with undimmed flames; the air, though heavy with some subtle perfume, was fresh and cool.

The furnishings were rich, but fantastic to a degree that, in that credulous age, was positively terrifying. The thick-pile carpet was blood-red in color. Crimson tapestries of grotesque design covered the rocky walls; the table and the heavy, throne-like chairs were of red lacquer, their intricate workmanship proclaiming their Chinese origin; even the ceiling had been painted the same ominous hue.

Yet there was one object in that room which did not partake of the vivid and predominating crimson. Stretched upon the table was something white as the driven snow. Its striking contrast drew the young cavalier's eyes to it before he had time to take another step forward. A thrill of cold fear passed through him as he realized that he was gazing at the figure of a man, rigid, stark and motionless.

He started violently backward, a hoarse cry bursting from his lips.

"A corpse!"

A slow, satirical smile passed over the Egyptian's dusky countenance as she watched in evident enjoyment the consternation of her visitor.

"Fear nothing. That form has never drawn the breath of life. Look closer, and you will smile at yourself for thinking it had ever lived."

In spite of the undisguised mockery of the old woman's assurance, Martino felt his confidence creeping back again. He approached the table, and the next moment he had difficulty in repressing the burst of laughter which rose to his lips in

the sudden revulsion of feeling caused by the sight that greeted his eyes.

The thing before him was a mere grotesque travesty of the human form. Composed of some wax-like substance, it had been rudely and unskilfully fashioned without the slightest attempt at anatomical accuracy or artistic beauty. Four elongated rolls of wax represented the limbs, their respective positions alone denoting which were the arms and which the legs. The head was a mere ill-shaped ball, into which two pebbles had been stuck for eyes. Beneath was a blob of wax which was evidently intended for the nose; a wisp of tow did duty for the hair; while a fish-bone, placed across the lower part of the sphere, gave the impression of a grinning mouth to the otherwise vacant countenance.

Martino's brows contracted in an angry frown as he stood looking down on the grotesque effigy.

"Have you brought me here to amuse yourself with an ill-timed jest?" he demanded. "What is the meaning of this absurd figure?"

The sorceress did not quail before his lowering glance.

"It represents the lover of Lisalda d'Canigiani's dreams," she returned steadily.

"*Diavolo!*" he burst out furiously. "You dare to make a mock of me——"

"Hear me out, and you will see that I am in deadly earnest." There was a dignified, almost arrogant note in the cracked voice. Gone was her former tone of cringing servility; she spoke as to an equal. "This wax figure is a *golem*. Do you understand what that means?"

He shook a puzzled head, and she went on impressively.

"It is a name well known to those who practise the magic arts. By means of certain rites and incantations, this inert wax can be changed into a living being.

Even as Adam, the first man, received the breath of life into his body of clay, so will the rude image that I myself have shaped be endowed with vitality—but not from the same Divine Power! Another, less hallowed, name must be invoked. But, as the first man rose from the dust of the earth, so shall this image rise from that table—not, mark you, ill-shaped and ugly as you see it now, but strong, handsome, flushed with the vigor and desires of hot-blooded youth—the very incarnation of one of the splendid gods of ancient Greece—an Adonis—an Apollo! He will breathe, think, walk and talk like the men that are born of women—nay, say rather like a very god among men! *And like a very god he will woo the proud Lisalda as she desires to be wooed!*"

"A fair prospect for me, truly!" Martino answered with a bitter laugh. "Even if you can accomplish this amazing thing, how can it profit my suit to the lady? I stand poor enough chance as it is, without the added disadvantage of the rivalry of a demon lover endowed with all the graces of his infernal procreator!"

"PATIENCE, young *Signor*, and do not rashly condemn a scheme of which you have as yet heard but half." Vengoldisia's voice was like the purring of a cat that anticipates a tasty feast. "If by my spells I can induce the dread Power whom I serve to endow this figure with life, I can also revoke that gift at any moment that you choose. Picture what will happen if you agree to my plan. This misshapen mass of wax becomes the living ideal on which Lisalda has set her wayward heart. You will take him to your house as an honored guest; provide him with money and rich clothes; introduce him to your friends as a distinguished foreign nobleman, traveling for pleasure. As soon as convenient, present your mysterious *protégé* to the Contessa. He will

be the living counterpart of the mental images he has so fondly treasured. She cannot fail to be enamored—enthralled! For, young as the handsome stranger may appear, he will possess all the experience of the human heart, its passion and its weakness, that his dread Master has accumulated since Eve renounced Paradise by the first sin of all. In a few hours all Venice will know that the fastidious Lisalda has at last met her heart's desire."

"A pretty picture!" The young man frowned at the vision that the witch's words conjured up. "And then?"

"Then will be the time to strike!" was the glib response. "In the first flush of her new-found happiness, before her mad passion has had time to feel the first cooling breath of satisfied desire, I break the spell which gives her lover life. In an instant, before her startled eyes, maybe even as he is clasping her unresisting body to his heart, the end of her romance will come. Her god-like lover will crumple, shrink, wither—until she finds that she is embracing a hideous waxen doll!"

Martino di Orselo stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"'Tis a revenge that might satisfy the hate of the Archfiend himself," he mused slowly. "But I desire more than vengeance—I want the lady herself."

"She will be yours!" was the confident answer. "Make it your business to be near at hand when the *golem* returns to his native wax. Then will be the time to press your suit and catch her heart on the rebound. Wounded pride, superstitious terror, dread of being denounced to the Holy Office as one tainted with the kisses of lips red-hot from Hell—everything will lure her to your arms at such a soul-shaking moment of revelation. I trow she will have had enough and to spare of ideal lovers! She will be well content to bestow her hand—and fortune—on a

husband of honest flesh and blood. A little courage, a little patience, a little tact—and she is yours!"

Martino said nothing; his eyes were veiled in thought. The cold-blooded villainy of the proposal did not repel him. There was nothing heroic or self-sacrificing in his love for the beautiful heiress. The loss of her fortune had balked his greed quite as much as the loss of herself had galled his pride. Though the plan had at first sounded utterly fantastic, it now seemed to offer at least a chance of success. But there was one important item that Vengoldisia had so far omitted to mention.

"I suppose you are not purposing to do all this for me for the sheer fun of the thing," he commented shrewdly. "What reward do you ask?"

"Nothing!"

"Nothing?" he echoed in amazement. "Surely that is passing strange——" He broke off at a sudden thought. "But perhaps your august Master intends to claim his own fee—later on?"

The sorceress shrugged her shoulders.

"That is as may be," she returned sullenly. "But you may rest assured that he can demand nothing but what is offered to him of your own free will. I do this thing simply because I am constrained to do it by a Power I cannot disobey. You, *Signor*, are under no such compulsion, and it is for you to decide whether I shall perform the rites or not. Answer quickly, *Signor*, for the dawn is near at hand and my arts avail not after the sun has risen. Shall I do this thing or not?"

He made a careless gesture, like a gambler staking a trivial coin.

"Then do it—if you can!"

Her answering smile showed that she at least had confidence in her unsanctified art.

"First it is necessary to inscribe the name of the person whom the *golem* shall

represent when it awakes to life," she said, and with the point of a needle she wrote "Adonis" on the breast of the figure.

"That name is one of the designations by which the Archfiend was known in ancient times!" exclaimed Martino.

Vengoldisia's black brows twitched slightly upward at his words.

"So you are not entirely unversed in the rudiments of thaumaturgy? You are quite right. Adonis is the name by which the Prince of Hell is invoked when he is desired to appear in the guise of a comely youth. Small indeed would be his chance of winning Lisalda's love were he to woo her under some of the dreadful shapes which he assumes! But be silent, else my spell is of no avail."

She flitted quickly round the room, her loose cloak fluttering behind her like the ragged plumage of some obscene bird, and as she passed each lamp she extinguished the flame with a quick puff of breath which sounded like the hiss of an angry serpent. Presently the great room was in darkness save for the single dim light which she allowed to remain burning immediately above the waxen figure. Placing a tripod brazier within arm's reach of the white, shapeless head, she fanned the smoldering charcoal until it had assumed a bright red glow.

This accomplished to her satisfaction, she disappeared into the deep shadows which draped the farther end of the apartment. There was the sound of a door being unlocked, and presently she reappeared bearing a small ivory casket, curiously carved, and a crystal phial containing a dark purple liquid.

REPEATING her warning that Martino was not to utter a sound, as he valued his life, she took a piece of white chalk and drew a circle completely round the *golem* and brazier, muttering the

while in an unknown but strangely sonorous tongue. Martino noticed that she was careful to make a low obeisance, after the manner of the slaves of the East, before entering the mystic circle, and another, even deeper, the moment she stepped within.

With a shrinking of horror the solitary onlooker realized that the sorceress was paying homage to her dread lord and master!

The rush of fearful thoughts bewildered him. Like a man in the grip of a fantastic dream he watched her take a pinch of powder from the ivory box and cast it into the brazier. A faint spiral of bluish smoke coiled upward from the glowing embers and the air became permeated with the cloying fumes of some drowsy incense. Although he remained perfectly conscious during the scene which followed, Martino had a sense of tenuous veils being drawn across his eyes. His sight became blurred and indistinct; the muttered incantations mingled with the muffled thunder of the waves against the shore overhead, like the sad rise and fall of some unhallowed dirge.

He sensed rather than actually saw the hag moisten a sponge with the contents of the crystal phial and squeeze it, so that the potion fell in great purple drops on the *golem's* grinning lips.

He stared with all his might; blinked his eyes, rubbed them and stared again. For into the dead whiteness of the wax a faint, flesh-like tinge was beginning to creep. The limbs were altering their shape, growing rounder, smoother, with swelling muscles and articulated joints. The crude stumps became endowed with hands and feet; the misproportioned trunk took upon itself a recognizable semblance to a human torso; the grotesque countenance merged into the lineaments of a youth, perfect in its strength and clear-cut beauty.

"Arise, Adonis!" the woman's measured voice was now speaking in words that could be understood. "Thou who art not of the dust of the earth nor of the spirit of heaven—Arise! Thou who art not born of woman, but conceived in the womb of Hell—Arise! Let thy nostrils receive the breath of life which is not as the life of mortal men. Let thy heart beat, thy blood course through its channels, thy whole being become an entity complete in itself. Arise, beautiful as the dawn, radiant as the evening star! Arise, Adonis, I beseech thee. Arise and live!—Live!—Live!" Her voice rose to a frenzied shriek at the final word.

A feeling of intense terror came over Martino di Orselo. With wild, distended eyes he saw the shapely limbs twitch and quiver with awakening life. Then, with the casual movements of any sleeper who rises from his couch refreshed, the Thing swung its legs over the edge of the table and stood upright, its face and naked form peerless and splendid as a sculptor's dream.

The witch's cackling laugh broke the death-like silence that followed.

"Allow me to present to you Signor Adonis di Luchio," she said with what sounded like a note of triumph, as she bowed to Martino. "Your friend and companion henceforth!"

IT WAS the night of Shrove Tuesday, and the time of carnival was drawing to its close. In a few hours midnight would proclaim the coming of Lent, the season of fasting and prayer, and the mortification of the desires of the flesh. Then all merry-making would cease; the mask would be cast aside for the mass-book, the tuneful lute for the penitent's scourge.

But a few precious hours of love and laughter yet remained, and Venice was making the most of them. Like mariners on the eve of submitting to the stern dis-

cipline and privations of a long voyage, or soldiers trying to cram all the roistering joy into a last debauch before facing a desperate encounter, all Venice was draining the cup of pleasure to the very dregs.

Sackcloth and ashes tomorrow—but to-night let Saturnalia reign!

The Palazzo Canigiani was crowded to the doors. A flotilla of gondolas lay before its wide flight of steps, a dozen or more to each gayly-painted mooring-post. From roof to water's edge, every window was a blaze of light. For that day the Contessa Lisalda had been formally betrothed to the handsome stranger from across the sea, and a magnificent fête was in progress to mark the event.

At the head of the great banqueting-table, on chairs slightly raised above their guests, the happy pair sat side by side. Lisalda's face was flushed, her lips smiling, and ever and again her laugh rang out with the joyous abandon of one who sees the apex of her desires within easy reach.

Strangely cold and impassive by contrast was the countenance of Signor Luchio. His half-veiled eyes roamed over the assembled company with an expression of indifferent contempt. He listened to the jests, the toasts, the showered congratulations and neatly turned speeches with an air of bored condescension. It almost seemed that, having accomplished his object in winning Lisalda's affection, he had no intention of making even the slightest endeavor to gain the good-will of her friends and relations.

Once or twice his insolent gaze rested for a moment on the face of Martino di Orselo, who occupied the place of honor immediately below the chair of the mistress of the house. Wine had flowed freely throughout the feast, and the young cavalier had seldom refused the replenished cup. He had drunk deeply to

drown the jealous anger which consumed him at the sight of the girl's infatuation for the *golem* lover which he himself had thrust into her eager arms. But the treacherous juice of the grape, far from soothing him, had but added fuel to his smoldering rage. Bitterly he cursed the hour in which he had been induced to become a party to the diabolical plot.

The behavior of his sinister fellow-conspirator gave him cause for uneasiness. Luchio had, it was true, played his part with all the skill and cunning that might be expected of a creature with such infernal tutelage. But, instead of being a mere puppet in Martino's hands, the *golem* had shown a disturbing tendency, not only to resent all interference, but actually to impose his will on his human ally. There had been no open rupture between them, but by insensible degrees Luchio had assumed control of the undertaking, until Martino had found himself a mere cipher, a passive onlooker who witnesses a stage play without quite knowing whether it is to end in comedy or tragedy. Like many another rash meddler with unknown powers, Martino had discovered that the Devil was easier to raise than to lay.

His position grew more false every hour. Most of the guests present seemed to be perfectly well aware that he occupied the invidious rôle of the rejected suitor at the betrothal feast of the woman who had chosen another. He had been conscious of their covert whispers and pitying glances since the moment when the lackey had announced his name at the door. He smiled grimly under cover of his wine-cup as he thought how easily he could turn the tables on his rival. Little did the dignified prelates and portly senators around him dream of the real nature of the handsome cavalier whose health they were drinking. It was a pity that he had not thought of ordering Ven-

goldisia to revoke her spell at that very moment. What a climax to that merry feast! He could picture the horrified consternation that would take the place of the smiles which now beamed on every face, when they realized they had been clinking glasses with the spawn of the foul fiend himself.

So engrossed was he in these pleasant anticipations of revenge that he failed to notice that the other guests had risen from the table. It was not until one of the servants touched him on the shoulder that he looked up with a start and rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Will you be pleased, *Eccellenze*, to join the others in the dancing-salon?"

"A murrain on their dancing!" Martino growled thickly. "If one of them had his deserts he'd be dancing at the end of a rope! Hands off, fellow!" he cried, as the servant put out his arm to steady the swaying figure. "I am not drunk!"

This was in a sense true. Martino had taken just enough wine to make him ready for a brisk quarrel. And in those days, when every gentleman wore a sword as an everyday article of attire, a quarrel and a duel meant practically the same thing.

"**H**EART of my heart, *donna mia*, how can I endure the time which separates me from the joy of claiming you as my own? I must perforce count the laggard hours, slowly as a miser counts his gold; yet how gladly would I fling them like a spendthrift into the lap of Time, that my happiness might be crowned this very moment—with thy dear self!"

Sweet as distant music on a summer's breeze, seductive as the siren's song, cunningly tuned as the serpent tongue that beguiled the first sin, the creature known as Adonis di Luchio breathed the words into Lisalda's willing ear as they sat together in the *loggetta* overlooking the

Grand Canal. From the adjacent ball-room came the sound of harps and viols playing a stately minuet. They had slipped away almost unnoticed after they had led off the first dance, the handsomest couple that trod the polished floor.

She lifted her shining eyes to his. Her lissom body swayed toward him like some glorious flower seeking the life-giving rays of the sun.

"Soon, my prince," she whispered. "It will be very soon."

He shook his head, frowning as he looked down on the gay panorama of pleasure that passed along the canal.

"Forty days!" he muttered moodily. "You know that no priest will celebrate a marriage during Lent? That condemns me to forty days in the barren wilderness of my thwarted passion. Forty days! How can I endure it? Every minute which keeps me from you will seem a century, every leaden hour an intolerable weight to drag me to despair!" He caught both her hands in his and drew her closer, so that she could feel the fierce throbbing of his heart. "But why *should* we endure the agony of waiting? Time was made for slaves; let us bid defiance to the hoary tyrant! Is not our love great enough to be a law unto itself? Are we to be harnessed to the narrow circle of convention, like wornout mules that plod their dull, everlasting round as they work a mill? No, by my father's kingdom!—a thousand times no!"

She drew back slightly.

"You swear by your father's kingdom," she said wonderingly. "Are you then a prince in very truth?"

"Aye, and of no mean domain!" he answered, a slight smile playing about his lips. "I have more subjects than any ruler on Earth, and every day adds to their number! But few men deny me their allegiance to my great army—the service is so pleasant, the promises so alluring.

Tell me, Lisalda, are you not all eager to behold my dazzling court?"

"I am, dear Luchio," she breathed between her slightly parted lips.

He sprang to his feet and caught her to his breast.

"Then come, my love!" he cried. "Enter with me into my kingdom this very night!"

"This very night?" she echoed in joyous amazement. "Is your kingdom so near at hand?"

He nodded, keeping his burning eyes fixed on hers.

"We will travel fast—on the wings of love," he assured her smoothly. "Say that you will come—now, this very minute! I have a gondola moored at the steps below. With my own hands I will row you beyond the outlying islands of the Lagoon, where my Barge of State, manned by a thousand lusty slaves, will meet us and bear you like an Empress to my domain. But you must come of your own free will, otherwise the pact is of no avail. Do you consent?"

For a moment she hesitated. Perhaps a warning instinct was stirred into life within her foolish heart by the passing breath from the wings of some merciful angel.

"If I come, will you promise never to forsake me?" she asked.

"I swear it!" he cried, turning his face away to hide the dreadful smile which accompanied his seemingly passionate avowal. "Never will I give you up—never, never! You will be mine—body and soul—mine for all eternity!"

He caught her up unresisting in his arms and turned toward the flight of marble steps which led down to the water's edge. But before he could gain them:

"Halt!" cried a hoarse, menacing voice, and Martino emerged from the shadow

of one of the great pillars, his drawn sword held ready in his hand.

"So this is the faith that fiends keep with their dupes?" the young cavalier exclaimed bitterly. "I have heard your specious wooing. I have heard her fascinated consent. Little does she know the nature of the kingdom over which she is to rule! Little does she dream to what hideous, unbaptized image she has given her love!"

"Heed not this drunkard's mouthing," Luchio whispered to the girl. Aloud he said haughtily: "Stand aside, *Signor!*"

With a swift movement Martino raised the point of his weapon until it pointed directly at the other's throat.

"Release that lady, and I will spare the life you have usurped."

A loud, derisive laugh was Luchio's only answer.

"Be warned—I have you at my mercy," the cavalier went on. "But I am no hired bravo, that I must strike unawares. You wear a sword. Draw, and defend yourself!"

The *golem* laughed again.

"Then strike, Signor Martino, strike home well and true! You will find that I am well defended already!"

He made a step forward as he spoke and Martino lunged with all his strength at the unprotected throat.

But it was the attacker, not the attacked, who staggered back and fell groaning to the floor. A sensation like the pain of a numbing blow had shot up his right arm, paralyzing it from wrist to shoulder. The finely tempered blade had been shattered into fragments, as though struck by invisible lightning, the instant it had come into contact with the flesh of the demoniacal lover.

The next instant, unheeding the screams of the terrified girl, Luchio ran lightly down the steps to the waiting

gondola, leapt aboard with his lovely burden, and launched forth into the stream.

DAZED, and still trembling from the shock of that awful contact, Martino managed to draw himself to his feet and descend to the landing-stage. Luchio's gondola, easily distinguished by the fact that it was the only boat not decked with gaudy lanterns, had already dwindled to a mere speck far down the vista of the Grand Canal.

Martino beckoned to the group of gondoliers who lounged on the steps.

"Which man of you has the swiftest boat?" he asked breathlessly. "Answer quickly—it is a matter of life and death—*and more!*"

Two brawny men stepped forward. Martino recognized them as the light fell on their weather-beaten faces, and his heart gave a throb of relief. They were the redoubtable brothers who, piloting their double-oared boat, had carried off the prize three times in succession at the annual regatta.

"A hundred ducats for each of you if you overtake that dark gondola before it reaches the open sea," he promised as he flung himself on board.

The effect of his words was instantaneous, for the sum represented a veritable fortune to the frugal-living gondoliers. The men leapt to their posts, one forward and the other aft of the curtained cabin in which Martino sat. The light craft gathered speed under their powerful, practised strokes. Like an arrow it shot beneath the center arch of the Ponte Accademia, its expert pilots—to whom every current of the canals was as familiar as the lines of their own horny palms—hugging the north shore of the bend in order to get every advantage of the slack water.

"*Viva, we gain on them!*" shouted

Jacopo, the elder brother, as the boat entered the last straight reach of the Grand Canal where it merges into the broader Canale di San Marco.

From here it was possible to see right down the waterway, past the swelling dome of La Salute, to where the arched façade of the Doge's palace fronted the lofty campanile on the Isola di San Giorgio Maggiore, about a quarter of a mile distant.

From this spot it is possible to reach the open sea by three routes; by bearing southeast along the Canale di San Marco, by following the Canale della Giudecca in the opposite direction, or by passing through a narrow canal to the south, the Canale della Grazia, which runs between the island of San Giorgio and the larger island of La Giudecca.

A breathless cheer came from Jacopo as the pursued gondola was seen to swerve suddenly and make direct for the entrance of the last-named canal.

"We cannot fail to overtake him now, *Signor,*" he called out in high delight. "The Grazia is shaped like a funnel with its broad end to the sea. At the narrow end he will find the tide running like a mill-race—against him! With our two oars to his one—our knowledge of the stream to his guesswork—only the Devil himself could help him to escape us now!"

Clutching the gunwale to steady himself—for they were cutting diagonally across the current now, and the water is not always placid in Venice—Martino stared ahead at the tiny, swift-moving bark which contained the girl whom he had leagued himself with the powers of darkness to possess.

Yes, they were gaining! The black hull loomed clearer, nearer! The thews and sinews of honest Jacopo and his brother were proving a match for the cunning of the fiend. When Luchio

steered under the lee of the island and disappeared from sight into the narrow mouth of the little canal, the pursuing gondola was barely twenty yards in his wake.

"Now ply your best, brothers!" Martino cried as their boat in its turn began to breast the confined, swift-running flood. "Make every ounce of weight tell. Row as you have never rowed before; for this night you are striving for a prize far greater than you have ever won!"

THE men needed no urging. Their long oars quivered like reeds under their mighty strokes. The water rose in a high wave on either side, and fell into curling foam as the sharp prow clove through it. Yet, in spite of their efforts, by the time they had urged the boat halfway down the canal, Luchio and his fair prize had already arrived at the farther end.

"Faster!" cried Martino, white to the lips and trembling with impotent rage. "Faster—or he will gain the open sea!"

"*Per Bacco!*" growled the old gondolier. "I thought we had him safe, but that young spark rows like the very Devil!"

But even as he cried the words the flying craft ahead lurched and staggered, and, as though by a miracle, lay motionless with its prow lifted clear of the water.

"He's struck a submerged sand-bank!" The oarsmen redoubled their flagging efforts as the elder uttered the glad cry. "He's fast aground. He can't escape us now, even if he were the foul fiend himself!"

Suddenly, as they neared their motionless and apparently helpless quarry, an appalling vision burst upon their sight. Out of the blackness that veiled the Adriatic, they saw a nebulous blur of

blood-red haze, rising, taking visible form before their startled eyes.

And what a form! It was a great barge outlined in living fire, driven toward them by hundreds of groaning slaves, who labored at the red-hot oars, under the torturing lash of demons armed with whips of scorpions and hissing serpents. An intense heat radiated from that floating hell of horror, but it was the heat which torments rather than consumes. The waves that dashed against its glowing sides, though they seethed and bubbled, did not burst into steam and hide the apparition in a merciful mantle of vapor. It was the ship of Satan, lit by the infernal fire that is never quenched.

Martino's boatmen ceased rowing and shrank back in dismay.

"Mother of God defend us!" cried one. "Back!—turn back as you value your immortal soul!"

"Take courage, comrades. I carry an amulet that will protect us from all harm." Martino held out his left hand and pointed to the ring he wore. "This silver ring contains a holy relic—brought by a Crusader from the Holy Land. Take hold of your oars again, if you call yourselves Christian men, and help me save that poor soul yonder. See, the Demon Ship is bearing down on them! Once she is borne aboard, Lisalda will be lost for ever!"

Then ensued a race like some contest of a frenzied nightmare. The dark waters of the Adriatic were churned into eddying foam under the hundred oars of the ghostly galley. Nearer and nearer it swept, swift as a questing albatross.

Three men against the legions of Hell—it seemed that such a hopeless contest could have but one ending.

"My strength is spent!" gasped Jacopo.

The old man staggered, and the oar slipped from his failing grasp. But, stooping quickly, he drew a huge flint-

lock pistol from his long sea-boot and leveled it at Luchio as he stood, a derisive smile of triumph on his handsome face, drawn up to his full height on the stern of the stranded gondola.

"If mortal bullet can reach your heart——" he muttered, and his finger tightened on the trigger.

"'Tis useless!" Martino snatched the weapon. "His hell-given life is proof against fire and steel alike. But this—— this holy relic——"

He slipped the silver ring containing the precious fragment into the wide barrel of the pistol, rammed it firmly home against the powder and shot with which it was already loaded, and looked carefully to the priming in the pan.

Cocking the trigger, he raised the strangely charged weapon and took steady aim at the broad chest of the defiant Luchio.

"Merciful Heaven!" he breathed the prayer with trembling lips. "Lend thine aid that I may send this monster back to his native Hell!"

Low as the words were uttered, they reached the ears of the *golem* across the narrow space of sea which intervened. They caused the smile to vanish from his face as though it had been erased by an invisible hand. Did his devilish instinct tell him what was about to happen? Did the holy talisman within the pistol make its potency felt even before it had been

driven into contact with his unhallowed flesh?

The thoughts flashed through Martino's mind even as he drew the sights into line with his target. He pressed the trigger; then every conscious thought was swamped in the wave of wonder that surged through his bewildered brain at the miracle which followed.

For, hard upon the crash of the explosion, Adonis di Luchio had given voice to a piercing shriek. He reeled blindly and lurched forward as he fell. But before his body touched the gondola's deck, a silent puff of blood-red flame enveloped it for an instant, causing it to crumple, shrink and dwindle. And when the flames dispersed there sprawled on the deck, in place of the comely youth, a hideous and grotesque figure of roughly molded wax.

At the same moment the demon galley sank hissing beneath the sea, and with the extinction of its spectral fires a great darkness descended on the surface of the waters.

But Martino could see the beautiful pale face looking up into his own as he snatched up the slender form and lifted it on board his own boat. He could hear his name uttered softly in a voice of nervous trembling, yet unmistakably Lisalda's. He could feel the warm, grateful kisses of the girl whom, at the eleventh hour, he had snatched from the unhallowed embraces of the Son of Satan.

