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The Devil's Pay

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

THE gondola thudded against the dock and a man jumped out. He drew his cloak about him, and the rings on his fingers flashed in the moonlight as he turned to the gondolier.

"I shall be gone perhaps for hours, Messer."

"No matter, Magnificent. I am at your command. I shall wait if need be until the dawn of the second day."

"Then wait."

He turned and plunged into the shadows, which seemed to reach out to engulf him. He walked swiftly, surely. His face was heavily veiled and his long black cloak reached to his ankles. The few pedestrians who passed him turned and stared for a moment but went on, failing to comprehend his mutterings. The path was none too smooth, and more than once the man from the gondola stumbled over the cobblestones. At length he modified his pace and began to scrutinize the houses about him. He stopped before a low structure squatting before him like an ugly, repulsive denizen of darkness. He raised his hand to rap upon the panel of the door, but before he could do so, it swung inward.

"Come," a voice bade him from the darkness, and he entered. At the farther end of the long hall he could discern a feeble light issuing from beneath the folds of a heavy curtain.

"Follow," came the voice again, and he felt his way along the wall to where the curtain was, and when he reached it, it was swept aside and the

light fell upon him and enveloped him. He stepped into the room that was thus disclosed, and the curtain fell again into place. Facing him was a man as repellent as the dwelling in which he lived. He was a short man, and his beady eyes flashed venomously at the visitor. He attempted to smile, but his sensual lips curled into a sneer which mocked the attempt. He slowly lowered the flambeau in the sconce which he had held at arm's length to the table behind him, and he endeavored to pierce the veil which covered his visitor's face.

The Duke of Venice raised the veil and moved forward.

"Messer Duca!" gasped the magician, and his face paled a trifle. "What is the cause for this honor, if I may so much as ask, Magnificent?"

The duke sank into a chair and gazed meditatively at the wizard before him.

"I have an enemy, Messer Gamani —." He glanced meaningly at his host.

"Ah, Excellency. Poisons? Or perhaps a keen stiletto," he answered, quick at comprehension.

"No. Neither will do. They avail me nought. I have used them. I have had my enemy set upon, but he turned and slaughtered my men and escaped without so much as a scratch. *Diavolo!* I have sent him wines diluted with the best of poisons, but they have gone into the canals of Venice. I have sent him a gorgeous gown saturated with a deadly poison, but he allowed a lackey to wear it and

discovered my plan, for, of course, the lackey died. I have sent him an opal with the curse of hell upon it, but he ground it and returned it to me. But need I go on? I have come to you as a last resort. He must die!"

"I see but one way, Excellency. Would you"—he stopped as if to reconsider, but resumed almost at once at the gesture of impatience manifested by his visitor—"would you enlist the powers of darkness?"

The duke nodded silently and shrugged his shoulders eloquently.

"You are aware, Messer Duca, that man must pay for consort with Satan?"

"I am aware. I care not for the consequences."

"It is a rash act, Magnificent."

"It remains that my enemy must die," returned the duke coldly.

Messer Gamani shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"Since you are determined, Excellency——"

"I am."

"Perchance you have a portrait of your enemy?"

The duke cast something upon the table and the magician's hand closed over it, and he peered at it intently.

"It bears a strong resemblance to the Borgia."

"Cesare? It is not he; it is not a Borgia, much as it may seem."

Messer Gamani remained silent. He moved to the fireplace and added fuel to the flames.

"Care you to watch my preparation, Excellency? I shall have completed the first part of the task in the space of a glass of sand. If you care not you may retire to my library and amuse yourself among my books."

"That I shall do, Messer Gamani."

A panel in the stone wall near the fireplace swung away and the duke passed into the wizard's library.

THE sands in the hour-glass dribbled slowly to a heap, and as the last grains slipped through, Messer Gamani opened the panel in the wall and allowed the duke to enter.

The magician held a wax image in his hand, and he showed it to the duke, who exclaimed sharply: "It resembles him, my enemy, Messer Gamani!"

"It was modeled from the miniature portrait."

"What do you propose to do with it?"

"The image must be burned. It will take another glass of sand, but it can not be hastened."

"But when does my enemy succumb?"

"As the flame from the wax dies, so your enemy dies."

An expression of skepticism crossed the face of the duke.

"I very much doubt."

"Satan does not fail his followers, Magnificent."

"It remains to be seen."

He seated himself and watched the wizard ignite the taper of the wax figure. The incantations of the magician over it drew his attention for a space, and he watched the wax figure dwindle slowly before his eyes. The head was gone, the main body, and the flame sputtered over the legs of the fantastic little mold. As the flame expired over the wax remnants Messer Gamani turned to the duke.

"He is dead, Excellency. At the hour, seven glasses of sand since the setting of the sun."

The duke threw a purse of ducats upon the table, but Messer Gamani made no move to take it.

"Beware, Messer Gamani, if your efforts fail, if you have sported." He indicated the purse. "Take this gold."

"The gold is my pay. But there is more——"

"More gold?"

"More pay. Satan must yet exact the penalty."

The duke was walking through the hall, the wizard at his heels. At the door they paused.

"The Devil may have a casket of gold," laughed the duke, "if my enemy is dead."

"Have you heard, Magnificent? The Devil loves nought so much as a soul."

His leering face vanished in the darkness, and the duke relished the vision of the magician's squat head on the end of a pike-pole as he picked his way back to where his gondola awaited him.

He stepped from his gondola to the dock before his magnificent palace and stood there a space watching the gondola recede in the distance. He looked up at the moon and wondered about his enemy. If he were not dead the vision of the wizard's head on a pike-pole would no longer be a vision, but a reality.

He was about to turn to ascend the steps to his palace when he heard the swishing of poles in the water. The gondola was coming at a swift rate, he judged. He did not err, for it hove into sight and came directly to the dock upon which he was standing.

"Messer Duca," came a muffled voice from the gondola.

The duke started; he recognized the voice of his watch in the house of his enemy.

"Ho, Messer Marcquo. Come you from the residence of the duke?"

"So I do, and I must haste to re-

turn, for my absence will be suspected. I have great news."

"The duke——?"

"Is dead."

"Excellent."

"At the end of the sixth hour after sunset he was seized with a most violent pain throughout his body. He screamed that he was burning; that he had been poisoned. But he had not been poisoned, for his food-tasters still live unaffected. At the end of the seventh hour he succumbed in horrible pain, delivering a curse upon you."

"It is well, Messer Marcquo. You shall be rewarded amply for this. You have not been followed?"

"I trow not, Magnificent."

"Then haste and return; it would not do to have someone suspect you as my envoy."

The boat moved away, and the duke exultantly leaped up the steps and into the palace. He ascended to his chamber, threw off his cloak and donned a luxurious gown. His enemy was dead! Now he would no longer be hampered in his nefarious designs by his enemy! His chief councilor must know. He would go to him, now, and inform him of the incident. The Devil could come and take a casket of gold—ten caskets, for that matter, for his enemy was dead.

He started down the stairway as swiftly as his burdensome robe would allow. But half-way down his gown tangled in his legs and he tripped and fell headlong down the stone steps.

A lackey found him next morning. He was dead; his neck was broken.

