

CHAPTER 1

The Book

As Corradino Manin looked on the lights of San Marco for the last time, Venice from the lagoon seemed to him a golden constellation in the dark blue velvet dusk. How many of those windowpanes, that adorned his city like costly gems, had he made with his own hands? Now they were stars lit to guide him at the end of the journey of his life. Guide him home at last.

As the boat drew into San Zaccaria he thought not – for once – of how he would interpret the vista in glass with a *pulegoso* of leaf gold and hot lapis, but instead that he would never see this beloved sight again. He stood in the prow of the boat, a brine-flecked figurehead, and looked left to Santa Maria della Salute, straining to see the white-domed bulk looming in its newness from the dark. The foundations of the great church had been laid in 1631, the year of Corradino's birth, to thank the Virgin for delivering the city from the Plague. His childhood and adulthood

Marina Fiorato

had kept pace with the growing edifice. Now it was complete, in 1681, the year of his death. He had never seen its full splendour in daylight, and now never would. He heard a *traghetto* man mournfully calling for passenger trade as he traversed the Canal Grande. His black boat recalled a funeral gondola. Corradino shivered.

He considered whether he should remove his white *bauta* mask as soon as his feet touched the shore; a poetic moment – a grand gesture on his return to the *Serenissima*.

No, there is one more thing I must do before they find me.

He closed his black cloak over his shoulders against the darkling mists and made his way across the Piazzetta under cover of his tricorn and *bauta*. The traditional *tabarro* costume, black from head to foot save the white mask, should make him anonymous enough to buy the time he needed. The *bauta* itself, a spectral slab of a mask shaped like a gravedigger's shovel, had the short nose and long chin which would eerily alter his voice if he should speak. Little wonder, he thought, that the mask borrowed its name from the '*baubau*', the 'bad beast' which parents invoked to terrify their errant children.

From habit borne of superstition Corradino moved swiftly through the two columns of San Marco and the San Teodoro that rose, white and symmetrical, into the dark. The Saint and the chimera that topped their pediments were lost in the blackness. It was bad luck to linger there, as criminals

The Glassblower of Murano

were executed between the pillars – hung from above or buried alive below. Corradino made the sign of the cross, caught himself, and smiled. What more bad luck could befall him? And yet his step still quickened.

There is one misfortune that could yet undo me: to be prevented from completing my final task.

As he entered the Piazza San Marco he noted that all that was familiar and beloved had taken on an evil and threatening cast. In the bright moon the shadow of the Campanile was a dark knife slashing across the square. Roosting pigeons flew like malevolent phantoms in his face. Regiments of dark arches had the square surrounded – who lurked in their shadows? The great doors of the Basilica were open; Corradino saw the gleam of candles from the golden belly of the church. He was briefly cheered – an island of brightness in this threatening landscape.

Perhaps it is not too late to enter this house of God, throw myself on the mercy of the priests and seek sanctuary?

But those who sought him also paid for this jewelled shrine that housed the bones of Venice's shrivelled Saint, and tiled the walls with the priceless glittering mosaics that now sent the candlelight out into the night. There could be no sanctuary within for Corradino. No mercy.

Past the Basilica then and under the arch of the Torre

Marina Fiorato

dell’Orologio he hurried, allowing himself one more glance at the face of the huge clock, where tonight it seemed the fantastical beasts of the zodiac revolved in a more solemn measure. A dance of death. Thereafter Corradino tortured himself no more with final glances, but fixed his eyes on the paving underfoot. Even this gave him no respite, for all he could think of was the beautiful *tessere* glasswork he used to make; fusing hot nuggets of irregular glass together, all shapes and hues, before blowing the whole into a wondrous vessel delicate and colourful as a butterfly’s wing.

I know I will never touch the glass again.

As he entered the Merceria dell’Orologio the market traders were packing away their pitches for the night. Corradino passed a glass-seller, with his wares ranked jewel-like on his stall. In his mind’s eye the goblets and trinkets began to glow rosily and their shapes began to shift – he could almost feel the heat of the furnace again, and smell the sulphur and silica. Since childhood such sights and smells had always reassured him. Now the memory seemed a premonition of hellfires. For was hell not where traitors were placed? The Florentine, Dante, was clear on the subject. Would Corradino – like Brutus and Cassius and Judas – be devoured by Lucifer, the Devil’s tears mingling with his blood as he was ripped asunder? Or perhaps, like the traitors that had betrayed their families, he would be encased

The Glassblower of Murano

for all eternity in ‘. . . *un lago che per gelo avea di vetro e non d’acqua sembante* . . . a lake that, frozen fast, had lost the look of water and seemed glass.’ Corradino recalled the words of the poet and almost smiled. Yes, a fitting punishment – glass had been his life, why not his death also?

Not if I do this last thing. Not if I am granted absolution.

With a new urgency he doubled back as he had planned and took the narrow bridges and winding alleys or *calles* that led back to the Riva degli Schiavoni. Here and there shrines were set into the corners of the houses – well-tended flames burned and illumined the face of the Virgin.

I dare not look in her eyes, not yet.

At last the lights of the Orphanage at the Ospedale della Pietà drew near and as he saw the candlelight warmth he heard too the music of the viols.

Perhaps it is she that plays – I wish it were so – but I will never know.

He passed the grille without a glance inside and banged on the door. As the maid approached with a candle he did not wait for her inquisition before hissing: ‘Padre Tommaso – *subito!*’ He knew the maid – a surly, taciturn wench who

delighted in being obstructive, but tonight his voice carried such urgency that even she turned at once and soon the priest came.

‘*Signore?*’

Corradino opened his cloak and found the leather gourd of French gold. Into the bag he tucked the vellum notebook, so she would know how it had been and one day, perhaps, forgive him. He took a swift glance around the dim alley – no, no-one could have drawn close enough to see him.

They must not know she has the book.

In a voice too low for any but the priest to hear he said: ‘*Padre*, I give you this money for the care of the orphans of the Pietà.’ The mask changed Corradino’s voice as he had intended. The priest made as if to take the bag with the usual formula of thanks, but Corradino held it back until the father was forced to meet his eyes. Father Tommaso alone must know him for who he was. ‘For the orphans,’ said Corradino again, with emphasis.

Recognition reached the priest at last. He turned over the hand that held the bag and looked closely at the fingertips – smooth with no prints. He began to speak but the eyes in the mask flashed a warning. Changing his mind the father said, ‘I will make sure they receive it,’ and then, as if he knew; ‘may God bless you.’ A warm hand and a cold one clasped for an instant and the door was closed.

The Glassblower of Murano

Corradino continued on, he knew not where, until he was well away from the Orphanage.

Then, finally, he removed his mask.

Shall I walk on till they find me? How will it be done?

At once, he knew where he should go. The night darkened as he passed through the streets, the canals whispering goodbye as they splashed the *calli*, and now at last Corradino could hear footsteps behind keeping pace. At last he reached the Calle della Morte – the street of death – and stopped. The footsteps stopped too. Corradino faced the water and, without turning, said ‘Will Leonora be safe?’

The pause seemed interminable – splash, splash – then a voice as dry as dust replied.

‘Yes. You have the word of The Ten.’

Corradino breathed relief and waited for the final act.

As the knife entered his back he felt the pain a moment after the recognition had already made him smile. The subtlety, the clarity with which the blade insinuated itself between his ribs could only mean one thing. He started to laugh. Here was the poetry, the irony he had searched for on the dock. What an idiot, romanticizing himself, supposing himself a hero in the drama and pathos of his final sacrifice. All the time it was *they* who had planned the final act with such a sense of theatre, of what was fitting, an amusing *Carnevale* exit. A Venetian exit. They had used a glass dagger – Murano glass.

Marina Fiorato

Most likely one of my own making.

He laughed harder with the last of his breath. He felt the assassin's final twist of the blade to snap handle from haft, felt his skin close behind the blade to leave no more than an innocent graze at the point of entry. Corradino pitched forward into the water and just before he broke the surface he met his own eyes in his reflection for the first and last time in his life. He saw a fool laughing at his own death. As he submerged in the freezing depths, the water closed behind his body to leave no more than an innocent graze at the point of entry.