

My Friend The Chauffeur.

By C. N. & A. M.
WILLIAMSON,
Authors of
THE...
Lightning Conductor
THE...
Princess Passes,
ETC.

(Continued.)

"Talking of gondolas, I forgot to tell you what a nice plan the Prince has for us," said Aunt Kathryn, with the air of revealing news. "As soon as I mentioned at what time you had arranged to leave Padua, he said he would telegraph to some dear friends of his at Venice, the Conte and Contessa Corramini, to send their beautiful gondola to meet us at Mestre (whatever that is) and that we needn't go into Venice by train across the bridge. Isn't that lovely of him?"

No one would have answered if it had not been for Mr. Barrymore. He said that it was a very good plan indeed, and would be pleasant for us than the one he had made, which he'd meant for a surprise. He had telegraphed from Padua to the Hotel Britannia, where he would stay, ordering gondolas to the tramway station in Mestre to save our walking into Venice by the back-door. Now those gondolas would do very well for our luggage, while the party of five made the journey more luxuriously.

"Party of five, you mean, unless the Prince has had an accident," amended Beecy.

"No, for I shan't be with you. I must drive the car to the garage at Mestre, and see that she's all right. Moray'll be with you to arrange everything at the Britannia, which you'll find one of the nicest places in the world, and I'll come when I can. Now, here's the turning for Mestre, and you must look for something interesting on the sky-line to the right, before long."

I couldn't help being disappointed, because I'd wanted to see Venice first; but I couldn't say that, and I'm afraid he thought, as everybody was silent, that nobody cared.

There was nothing to show the turning to Mestre, except a small tablet that we might easily have missed, and the road was languidly narrow, running along a causeway with a deep ditch on either hand. Aunt Kathryn was so afraid that a horse would come round one of the sharp bends walking on its hind legs, that she was miserable, but I trusted Mr. Barrymore and enjoyed the country, a real country now, with no more palaces, villas, or beautiful wooded farmhouses.

The distance was hidden by long, waving grasses, over which the blue line of the Cornishian Alps seemed to loom like a cloud. There was a pungent smell of salt and of seaweed in the air, and the nearness of the lagoon—and Venice. Then, suddenly, the "something" Mr. Barrymore had told us to look for, grew out of the horizon—dim and mysterious, yet not to be mistaken; hyacinth-blue streaks that were pinnacles and campanili, bubbles that were domes and towers, and the gold of the sunset and the grey-green of the tall grass, for no water was visible yet.

"Venice!" I whispered; but though Beecy and Aunt Kathryn each cried: "Oh, there it is! I saw it first!" they were so absorbed in the air, that I could not call it out, that they soon lost interest in the vision.

"Conte! It's like Condé's fluid!" said Beecy. "I won't call him 'Conte.' I should laugh at his face. If plain Conte isn't good enough for him, and Conte for her, I shall just say 'You'—so there!"

Soon we saw a great star-shaped fort as we ran into a town, which was Mestre; and at the same time we lost shadow-Venice. Passing a charming villa set back behind an avenue of cypresses and plane trees, that gave an effect of dappled moonlight even in full day, some one in the tall gateway waved his hand.

"By Jove, it's Leo Bari, the artist!" exclaimed Sir Ralph. "I forgot his people lived here. I know him well; he comes to the Riviera to paint. Do slow down, Terry."

So "Terry" slowed down, and a hand, some, slim young man ran up, greeting Sir Ralph gaily in English. He was introduced to us, and his sister, a lovely Italian girl, with Titian hair, was invited to leave the becoming background of the gateway to make our acquaintance.

They were interested in the details of our tour, especially when they heard that, after a week in Venice, we were going into Dalmatia.

"Why, I'm going down to Ragusa to paint," said he. "I've been before, but this time I take my sister Beatrice. She paints too. We go by the Adriatic Lloyd to-morrow. Perhaps we see you there?"

"Have you ever been down as far as Cattaro?" asked Aunt Kathryn, from whose tongue the names of Dalmatian towns fall trippingly, since she "acquired" a castle and a title there.

"Oh, yes, and to Montenegro," replied the artist.

"And do you remember the houses of the neighborhood?" went on Aunt Kathryn.

"It is already but two years I was there, so a house would have to be young for me not to remember," replied the young man, unconscious of the funny little twist of his English.

"I am thinking of a very old house; Slosh—the Castle of Hrvoyva. Have you seen it?"

"Ah, that old ruin!" exclaimed the artist. "I see it, yes. But there is not more than Schloss Hrvoyva to see, only the rock for it to stand!"

Poor Aunt Kathryn! I was sorry for her. But she bore the blow well, and, after all, it's the title, not the castle for which she cares most—that, and the right to smear everything with crowns.

"Perhaps I'll ask you to paint Hrvoyva

for me some day," she said. But afterwards, when we had bidden the hand some brother and sister au revoir, she remarked that she was afraid Mr. Barrymore had an artistic eye.

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"Look! I did this for you, so that you would go into Venice in a way worthy of yourself," the Prince murmured in my ear, when the car stopped, joining his which was waiting. He waved his hand towards a wonderful gondola, with a gesture such as Aladdin's Genie might have used to indicate the magic palace. The glossy black coat of the swan-like thing brought out the full value of the rich gold ornaments. A long piece of drapery trailed into the water behind, and two gondoliers, like bronze statues dressed in dark blue, crimson and white, stood up tall and erect against a background of golden sea and sky.

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"The costume of your Sisterhood would look pretty in a gondola," Beecy answered. And again the coldness fell upon me which I always feel at a reminder, intentional or unintentional, of the future. But the chill was gone in a moment—lost in the luminous air, which had a strange brilliancy, as if reflected from a stupendous mirror, and never anything even remotely resembling it before. It was as though we were living inside a great opal, like flies in amber. And it seemed that in a world so wonderful everything one did, or looked, or thought, ought to be wonderful too, lest it should be out of tune with all-surrounding beauty.

Sea and sky were of one color, except that the sea appeared to be on fire underneath its glassy surface. The violet sky was strewn with blown rose-petals and golden feathers; the tiny waves were of violet, and with rose and gold, and spattered with jewelled shells, which might be flashes from a Doge's vanished ring.

In the distance, sails of big ships were beaten into gold leaf by the sinking sun; and nearer, there were other sails bright as flowers—a sea picture gallery of Martonias, of arrow-wounded hearts, of martyred saints, or bright-robed earthly idlers.

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Turning my back to the arched railway bridge, which accompanied us too far, I looked only at sky and water, and at Venice rising from the sea.

The tide was running out, the Prince said, (among other chattering, while I wished everybody woven in a magic spell of silence) and the gondoliers made swift progress, rocking lightly like a shell, over the bright ripples of the lagoon.

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The good-byes said, we swept through the picturesque town to make up for lost time, and presently encountered a little electric tram running seaward on a causeway. We followed over a grass-grown road, and suddenly found Venice again so near that we could actually distinguish one building from another. Beyond a broad stretch of water the dream city floated on the sea.

"Look! I did this for you, so that you would go into Venice in a way worthy of yourself," the Prince murmured in my ear, when the car stopped, joining his which was waiting. He waved his hand towards a wonderful gondola, with a gesture such as Aladdin's Genie might have used to indicate the magic palace. The glossy black coat of the swan-like thing brought out the full value of the rich gold ornaments. A long piece of drapery trailed into the water behind, and two gondoliers, like bronze statues dressed in dark blue, crimson and white, stood up tall and erect against a background of golden sea and sky.

They helped us in, hat in hand; and not the Chauffeur's absence nor the Prince's presence could spoil for me the experience that followed.

Sunk deep in springy cushions, I half sat, half lay, while the bronze statues swayed against the gold, softly plying their long oars, and waiting me—me—to Venice.

I felt as if I were moving from the wings of a vast theatre onto the stage to play a heretic's part. Evening bells chiming a paean to the sunset, floated across the wide water faint as spirit-chimes, and they were the leitmotif for my entrance.

"What a shame to be in motoring things!" I said to Beecy. "Women should have a gondola dressed in black, and already a different one each day. I should like to have a deep crimson gown and a pale green one—lilac too, perhaps, and sunrise pink, all made picturesquely, not in any stiff modern way."

"The costume of your Sisterhood would look pretty in a gondola," Beecy answered. And again the coldness fell upon me which I always feel at a reminder, intentional or unintentional, of the future. But the chill was gone in a moment—lost in the luminous air, which had a strange brilliancy, as if reflected from a stupendous mirror, and never anything even remotely resembling it before. It was as though we were living inside a great opal, like flies in amber. And it seemed that in a world so wonderful everything one did, or looked, or thought, ought to be wonderful too, lest it should be out of tune with all-surrounding beauty.

Sea and sky were of one color, except that the sea appeared to be on fire underneath its glassy surface. The violet sky was strewn with blown rose-petals and golden feathers; the tiny waves were of violet, and with rose and gold, and spattered with jewelled shells, which might be flashes from a Doge's vanished ring.

In the distance, sails of big ships were beaten into gold leaf by the sinking sun; and nearer, there were other sails bright as flowers—a sea picture gallery of Martonias, of arrow-wounded hearts, of martyred saints, or bright-robed earthly idlers.

We were rowing straight into the sunset, straight into fairy-land, and I knew it; but what would happen when the red and gold had swallowed us up? The sparkle of the