

*The sea is lapping at the ancient wooden pier, that pier that was painted with the proud stripes of a Doge's palace.* The water rises quickly, lapping over the dock and threatening the stalls of the bakers, butchers and others who have set up their merchandise stands on the nearby Piazzetta San Marco. Desperate to conclude their affairs and close up shop for the day, the men barter until the rising water suggests that there is a storm at sea and the Adriatic is rising almost as fast as they can pack up and head home. The bells ring a warning that *aqua alt'* is coming and the nearby bankers and the merchants pack what goods they have left into their somber black *gondolas* and head up the canal, many toward the region of *Canareggio* and the Jewish quarter, where the bankers live, and others disappear among the many thousands of people who live in Venice now, toward the close of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The bankers live in an area called the *ghetto*, which comes from the Venetian word for foundry. It is a colorful district and the banker nods at the guard as he passes the entrance. Inside, he will be safe from robbery or mischief sometimes practiced on Jews, which is not unknown in the Gentile districts outside. Early in their history, the rabbi had marked had out a place for the enclosure, close to the three synagogues that the vibrant community enjoys. Some of the Jews have come from Spain, where persecution could be particularly acute: convert to Christianity or die was the byword there, and the death of a recalcitrant Jew or an unbelieving Gentile were fearsome at the hands of the Spanish Inquisition. Though Jewish people in Venice are allowed only to follow banking and a few merchant professions, they are appreciated since they can do what Christians are not allowed to do: charge interest, which the Christians labeled "usury." Because famous musicians such as the Bassano family and Salomone Rossi live in it, the ghetto area is rich in music and warm with the smell of baking and the synagogues are beautiful and soon it will be *shabbat*. I love to go there and see many musicians and artists who make the ghetto their home.

The Jewish community swells with an ever-growing population, coming from five distinct areas as other European states close their doors to those of the Jewish religion. With a limited amount of space, the ghetto is being built in haste story by story. The women look out the windows and call *Shabat Shalom* to one another; it is Friday night, nearly time to light the Sabbath candles and say the prayers of blessing that mark this reverent and quiet day, the seventh. Right next door to the Ghetto, the great painter, Tiziano, has his shop. He cannot resist occasionally using models from a brothel nearby, as he paints colorful, sensuous women, as well as deeply spiritual subjects.

The *Canareggio* opens on to the Adriatic Sea, which is becoming a bit wild tonight, with darkening clouds hovering over the city. As we always do when *aqua alt'* threatens, citizens of Venice hasten to take the few pieces of furniture up the stairs from the floor nearest the canal, and out of the way of the advancing water. Cooks and maids prepare *la cena*, the light evening meal which will be taken around eight o'clock; and will be a fish meal, since it is Friday and the Venetians are abstaining from flesh meat this day. Fish and seafood are abundant and those outside the ghetto enjoy seafood such as octopus and squid as well as fish, using seafood in place of fish, and that sparingly, during times of strict fast. Fasts are not infrequent even for those whose homes are opulent, as of course besides Lent and Advent,

Christians abstain from meat on both Wednesdays and Fridays and holy days. We are known for our seafood dishes.

Opulence is everywhere the proud flag of the golden Lion flies, we Venetians like to say. Though this is not altogether true. However, Venetians attempt to care for one another, whether it is through mutual aid societies such as artisans' guilds, homes for orphans, or even in hospitals of charity run by the most dedicated mendicants (begging orders), the Franciscan and Dominican orders. As poor as these orders are reputed to be, the devout, in their honor, have raised Gothic cathedrals, rivals in splendor, across the Grand Canal from one another. Our family frequently attends San Zanipolo, run by the Dominicans; across the canal is La Madonna Gloriosa--in short, I Frari. Our parish church is San Giobbe. I like to go there and look at the wonderful paintings and plaster bas reliefs of Lucca Della Robbia which richly illustrate the lives of the saints and angels. There are four huge rondels on the ceiling put in place by Della Robbia, and I get a stiff neck looking at them during Mass. The church is cold, however, even in the spring. Churches are so big, they are impossible to heat. I like the warm, drowsy smell of the votive candles and the sweet faces of the Madonna and Child, and as a painter, I learn from what I see. I cannot completely understand the Latin, that is, besides the Mass--of course I know the main parts of the Mass, since I like to sing. We speak *Venezian'*, Venetian dialect, and I am not that familiar with the Latin tongue. There are many different languages spoken all around our world, both near and far, and it is sometimes hard for us to communicate, so Latin is the official language of scholars and diplomats. It is said that every *campanella*, or bell-tower, in the countryside, has its own language and it seems to be true!

There are so many miracles we like to paint into the arts of Venice, and if you'll come with me, I will tell you about some of them. Here is a St. Sebastian who is invoked in time of sickness. It is said that his prayers will help cure those who are ill, especially of the plague. He was tied to a post and shot to death with arrows because of his faith. I haven't tried to paint him, but there are lots of pictures of him and I don't particularly want to do another. It is difficult to find colors for your paintings--they are taken from the ground and mixed. An apprentice usually gathers the colors and they are very expensive. I know that from Master Titiziano who used to find the colors in the rocks, soil, and vegetation where he lived in the Alps. I am lucky to be able to obtain colors, and also to be able to obtain a *flauto dolce*, a recorder, from the many made by the Bassano masters in the ghetto. But now, let me go on about some of the miraculous events that are celebrated here in Venice.

On the other side of the Canal and toward San Zanipolo, I can walk to the Madonna del Orto church. An *orto* is a garden, and a large statue of the Madonna and Child was dug up on the site of the garden. A church was built around the statue and you can see it when you visit. I go there often to light a candle; it is a beautiful church, and because of its unique round towers, a landmark for those traveling on the sea.

Another popular saint that you see frequently is St. Christopher. He was a very ugly man, so much so that he is sometimes painted with a dog's face, especially by the Greeks. But he was painted beautifully by Master Titian. He is always shown carrying the Christ Child on his shoulders. He was an evil man once, but because of his great strength, he served to carry people and their possessions across a raging river. One day Christopher picked up a child and carried him on his shoulders. Suddenly, in the middle of the

water, the child got very heavy, and Christopher felt that he was carrying the weight of the whole world on his back. He pushed his huge staff into the river-bottom and shoved with all his might until he got to the other side. "Who are you?" he asked the child. "I am the Christ-Child," replied Jesus, "and you will be called 'Christopher' because you just carried Christ across the river. Since then, many Christians have been known as Christopher, "Christ-bearer." Of course, carrying Baby Jesus changed St. Christopher's life, and now travelers ask his prayers so that they will have safe journeys.

As the day goes on and it becomes dusk, many people appear at the door to light the images of Christ and His mother or other saints which light the dark street-corners. We Venetians are required to do that so that our city will be safe, because it gets very dark at night. It is appropriate for us, also to thank God for His protection and our holy Virgin Mary for her prayers. There are many, many miracles attributed to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Saints. Most of our painting is about those miracles. One of the oldest is in the Basilica San Marco, and it is one of the many that our Venetians saved from Constantinople so they can bring them home to Venice, like they did the body of St. Mark himself. The Madonna Nicopeia is the Bringer of Victory, and it used to be carried into battle by the Emperor of Constantinople. Of course, our Venetian conquerors brought the Madonna Nicopeia back to Venice in 1204, when they were crusading to save the Holy Land, as they did so often. We believe that having this precious icon, perhaps painted by St. Luke himself, will keep Venice from falling into the hands of our enemies. But it is St. Mark whom God promised would have his last resting-place in Venice, when he was traveling here many years before. God said to him, "Peace to you, Mark, my evangelist." And that is what is written on the flag on the book under the lion's paw.

Master Tiziano is my favorite of the wonderful painters who are alive today. In 1516, he started the greatest of all the portraits of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and it is in the church of the Franciscan friars.

The subject is the Assumption of Mary. Before the falling asleep at about 70 years of age, she expressed a desire to see the Twelve Apostles of Christ and bid them farewell. The Greeks have painted this scene in detail, but they just show the Apostles standing around, and Christ picking up His mother who is shown as a tiny baby in swaddling-clothes, and carrying her up to heaven in His arms. We Catholics like to remember her as the powerful woman who loved her Son from His birth, and followed Him to the cross, and who was present with the Apostles in the Upper Room. At her word, Jesus did his first miracle. Upon her death (He called it "falling asleep,") His mother was taken by him into heaven. Her tomb was empty, too, not because she had the power of rising from the dead, but because He did. We believe that He loved her and took her to Himself, and that she sprang forth into glory because she and her Son could not be separated. Come with me, I will show you the painting done by Master Tiziano.

There are many more illustrated miracles that I could show you, but I think you can see from these examples how the Venetians define themselves. We both love our Byzantine heritage, feeling that we saved it, and many people, from Constantinople, and we love our Roman Catholic faith. The beauty of both of these traditions can be seen in the great church, Basilica San Marco, and I hope you will visit there one day.

