My first encounter with Venetian expatriate social life was at a dinner party at the Palazzo Dario in April 1979. Two palazzos along the Grand Canal from Peggy Guggenheim's, the Dario had been partially gutted two years earlier when an electric fire had been left on over Christmas, so the party guests had to pass through a burnt-out *piano nobile* on their way to the dining-room and library. They made a curious group: Peter Lauritzen, the American art critic whose pointed beard reminds one of the Sheriff of Nottingham, and his striking wife, the Hon Rose Lauritzen; Veste Entwistle, a fluffy white-haired Russian princess, who escaped the Revolution via China and now designs mosaic table-tops; Geoffrey Humphries, the highly sexed artist who is Venice's answer to Adrian George; Johnny Hohnsbeen, a quiet American, then unofficial curator of the Guggenheim; and, an incongruous note, Rose Wild, the henna-rinsed fiction editor of *Woman's Own*.

The hosts were Anya Hillman, the 38-year-old custodian of the Dario, in her Nancy Cunard ivory bangles, and, also in bangles, Rupert Forbes Adam, the 23-year-old grandson of Sir Oswald Mosley, who has since become engaged to her. *That's* set Venice talking.

In Venice one's every movement is common knowledge. It has always been the city of tittle-tattle, of masks, of intrigue. On every corner, lurking behind the *capuccino* machine, there is still an informer, relaying news of one's progress down the Zattere. The talk is still gossipy and often malicious, like high table talk at university.

That night at dinner Johnny Hohnsbeen confided the latest eccentricity of Cristina Franchetti, the Cuban-born heiress who is, single-handedly, the Venetian jet set. 'She is refusing to have bread on her table at Harry's Bar to avoid paying the *coperto*.'

Those who had not been invited to the Dario were undoubtedly aware of the party. Later in the evening, when the action moved to the library, they could hardly have remained ignorant. The windows overlooking the Grand Canal were thrown open, more wine appeared, the stereo blasted Lene Lovitch and there was frenzied dancing. Later still, when the rest of Venice was completely deserted, Cole Porter's 'Where is the life that late I led' was played again and again. Its aptness was not missed by anyone:

'Poor Venetia,
Does she still chat so?
Or is she drinking
In her stinking
Pink palazzo?'

Above, Geoffrey Humphries. The burnt-out Palazzo Dario is on the extreme right. Below, Christina Thoresby.

In the eighteen months since the Dario party much has changed. The Dario is up for sale, and Peggy Guggenheim died at Christmas. Both events have accentuated the rifts and peculiarities of the Venetian British. There has always been tension between Establishment Venice — with Sir Ashley Clarke as the benevolent headmaster and his wife, Frances, as the firm but fair matron — and the Bohemian Venice that ranged around the Palazzo Dario. Establishment Venice rallied to meet Princess Alexandra and John Julius Norwich at the opening of the restored Porta de la Carta last year — Ned Guinness and his wife Joan, Philip and Jane Rylands, Peter and Rose Lauritzen (both of whom, as it happens, have Bohemian pasts), various professors from the university. Bohemian Venice (not invited to the opening) includes Geoffrey Humphries, Anya Hillman, miscellaneous painters with German surnames, various afficionados of the Dario.

It was Kit Lambert, the manager of The Who, who bought the Palazzo Dario ten years ago. Moving in with his collection of Spode vases, he set about at once founding a rival school to the Clarkes, with himself as headmaster and no rules whatsoever. Lambert was delighted by Venice. Friends like Bianca Jagger were given extravagant dinners at the Gritti, where the Queen of Yugoslavia and her mother, Princess Astasia, had permanent suites. Hearing of that witty cable from a New York correspondent: 'Streets full of water. Please advise', Lambert telexed friends: 'Suites full of queens. Please arrive.'

Parties at the Dario became increasingly outrageous. Eighteenth-century topographical volumes were dropped from the library windows onto passing *vaporettos*. But Kit was determined to join the committee of Venice in Peril and help to save the city. A dinner was thrown for Sir Ashley at the Gritti where the chef produced a cake in the shape of the Salute. Kit's suitability was called into question, though, when he organised an after-dinner competition to see who could throw chicken bones farthest into the canal.

Five years later Kit was made a ward of court, and his friend Anya was left to continue the fun. Six months ago the Dario was officially closed up, so the focus of Bohemian Venice switched to Geoffrey Humphries's studio on the Giudecca. The four enormous rooms with views towards the Gesuati hold an ever-changing charivari of Belgian cello players as well as enormous stacks of his canvasses. Their subject matter dwells on huge Italian bottoms and lurid

flashing lips. 'And they're getting *more explicit all the time*', cautions Christina Thoresby, the organist at the English church, Peggy Guggenheim's oldest friend and an authority.

Geoffrey arrived in Venice fifteen years ago in hot pursuit of a girlfriend who implied in a postcard that she was contemplating an affair with a *vaporetto* driver. Arriving too late ('the Italian post is notoriously slow') and without money, he made ends meet drawing Bellini's Madonna on the pavement until it was washed away three days running by the *aqua alta*. Disaster was only averted by a loan from his uncle, who was then the vice-consul.

The high point of Geoffrey's year is the arrival in January of the John Hall pre-university course. Started in 1963, the course introduces 60 or so English school-leavers, often rather Chelsea girls, to the merits of Giorgione and Carpaccio. Invariably it introduces some of them to Geoffrey too. As Bohemian-in-residence and perennial dangerous element, Geoffrey's tuna-fish-and-rice parties are legendary. Pinned to the studio walls is photographic evidence of the impromptu naked bathing parties he leads from the Redentoro.

More controversial has been the row over Peggy Guggenheim's collection. In her will she left it, unendowed, to the Solomon Guggenheim Foundation in New York, with the proviso that it should remain in her bunker-style palazzo. And she left instructions that Philip Rylands should administer the collection, not Johnny Hohnsbeen, who had run it for the past seven years. Venice was bewildered. Peggy had never treated Johnny very nicely, yet he had been a permanent fixture behind the bar at her parties and he had always sold the catalogues. But Philip had collaborated with Sir Ashley Clarke on his book about the restoration of the Madonna Dell'Orto and had the qualifications. Moreover Philip and his pretty blonde American wife, Jane, had become increasingly close to Peggy in her final year. Some observers spotted a portent of what would happen at Peggy's eightieth birthday at the Gritti Hotel. In the group photograph, for instance, Jane's arm rests on Peggy's chair; Johnny's anxious face peeps out from the back.

Philip Rylands had met Jane, ten years his senior, when he was reading history of art at Cambridge and enjoying the cachet of being the nephew of George Rylands at King's. They married, and have a house in Grantchester Street, where they spend Christmas; they drove to Venice in a Volkswagen camper in 1972 for Philip to complete his PhD on Palma Vecchio. They soon found more permanent digs in the Palazzo Contarini delle Figure, beneath the Lauritzens' old flat.

Philip quickly involved himself with Venice in Peril, helping Sir Ashley with the restoration and fund-raising. When the Clarkes leave Venice to retire to Devon, it will be Rylands who takes over as secretary. 'I'm sure I won't be nearly so efficient as Sir Ashley,' says Rylands. 'He leaves the Italians slightly aghast by producing his committee minutes within a week. Unheard of here.'

Jane, meanwhile, was writing a Letter from Venice for the Rome-based *Daily American*, in which she catalogued, *Ritz*-newspaper-style, the activities and indiscretions of the palazzo set. It would be hard to conceive of a more thankless project. With the British and American community only 40 strong, exclusion seemed a calculated insult, and inclusion was frequently as unwelcome. Discontent reached boiling point when Jane described Cristina Franchetti's annual saint's day party but omitted the guest of honour, Christina Thoresby. Buttonholed for an explanation, she resigned the column.

Any lingering discontent was not in evidence, however, at the Rylands's cocktail party on the flat roof of the Guggenheim this July. Most of the guests hadn't seen the galleries since they had been rehung by Thomas Messer, curator of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. They were quick to chide and slow to praise. 'That Calder's been moved,' shrieked Marietta Stern Guetta, the Guardian of the Canadian pavilion at the Biennale. 'I can see it has through the window.' In fact there

Above, Olga Rudge, for 30 years Ezra Pound's lover. Below, Peter and Rose Lauritzen on their balcony in the Cannaregio, 'the Clapham of Venice'

have been few changes, though the famous collection of winged sunglasses and earrings were bequeathed to Peggy's son, Sindbad, and grandchildren. 'I expect they're being worn on the beach at St Tropez by now,' said Christina Thoresby.

A party on the gallery roof was itself a novelty, and not all were delighted with the departure. 'At least it will give the Carabinieri something new to stare at,' said Marietta. 'They always used to peer at Peggy sunbathing.'

Above, Philip and Jane Rylands. Below, the Queen of Yugoslavia

Living in the centre of Venice is so claustrophobic that Peter and Rose Lauritzen have just moved out to the Ghetto, four unfashionable *vaporetto* stops down the Grand Canal. 'It's the Clapham of Venice,' explains Rose. 'Absolute nonsense,' retorts her husband. 'If anything, it's the East End. The Cannaregio was very fashionable until the eighteenth century. The Duke of Urbino lived opposite. Then everyone moved out.'

The Lauritzens spotted the flat was for sale in the local paper. 'Venetian friends were amazed. Property so rarely comes onto the market.' Peter was particularly delighted by the historical associations of the palazzo: 'It was Sir Henry Wooton's British Embassy from 1604 to 1610 and became, briefly, the Anglican chaplaincy.' Peter has strong ties with the English Church in Venice. He shared a house in Florence with the previous British chaplain, Victor Stanley, and raised £15,000 to redecorate the church.

Rose finds the quieter Ghetto a much more suitable area to bring up their three-year-old son, Frederick. 'Taking him to school was like running the gauntlet. One would *always* meet some fearfully chic Venetian friend when one was in jeans with absolutely no make-up.' Now Frederick goes to the local convent where he is taught 'everything from reading to rock-and-roll dancing by marvellous nuns. Italian schools have terribly high standards at primary level; a friend's son passed easily into Westminster from one. After the age of twelve they become terribly political, though. A boy was mugged at school in Milan last month for reading the *Corriere della Sera*, a "Fascist" newspaper.'

The new flat also has a library where Peter can write undisturbed. *The Palaces of Venice* is awaiting a reprint; he is completing a draft of a new history of the lagoon. 'I have tried to trace the development of islands like the Lido from the pine forests and artichoke farms that Byron and Goethe knew to the fashionable beach resort it had become by 1886.' The draft complete, they were off to spend August in Ireland at Mount Stewart, Rose's family home fifteen miles outside Belfast. Ironically it won't be much of a change. 'Venice can be very like a gossipy Irish village,' despairs Rose.

The fount of most gossip is Christina Thoresby, who will spill the *fagioli* at the drop of a Campari soda. Arriving in Venice as music critic for the *Continental Daily Mail*, she soon found that her freelance contributions were producing insufficient income. 'Venice is no Vienna, so I became an expert on Lorenzo Lotto instead.' Now she teaches him at the John Hall course. 'I used to have Carpaccio up my sleeve too, until one pupil thought my lecture was about raw meat.' This autumn she is taking part in a symposium on Lorenzo Lotto at Asolo. 'I'm afraid my paper is so secret that I couldn't even reveal its nature to you,' says Christina with rare discretion. 'You see, I've stumbled on a *completely new aspect*.' Her great disappointment in life was missing Jimmy Carter's visit to Montines, the family restaurant opposite her tiny house, when he was in Venice for the economic summit. 'The lights went out in a thunderstorm for twenty minutes. His bodyguards were terrified. They thought it was an elaborate kidnap.'

In another equally tiny house in the Dorsoduro can be found Olga Rudge, for 30 years the lover of Ezra Pound, until he died eight years ago. At 85, she wears earrings that don't match and has an urgent sense of mission to 'put the record straight about Ezra. He had lots of Jewish-Venetian friends so, you see, he *couldn't* have been anti-Semitic.'

Rarely seen out of her house, she spends her life dwarfed by Godier's sculpture of a hieratic head, cataloguing her superb library of early-twentieth-century poetry. She is determined not to part with any of her Ezra Pound manuscripts. While I am visiting her the telephone rings. It is a friend with news of a Sotheby's sale of manuscripts, where a corrected transcript of Pound's *Cantos* has fetched £11,000. But who, speculates Olga, can have sold it? 'Do you suppose Faber would sell a manuscript? I can't think who else would have one. But why must it always be an anonymous seller? People will think it is me.'

The rather sad sight of a sodden pile of art books, their pages stuck together, is a reminder of the annual *aqua alta*. Olga recalls the 1966 disaster. 'We were trapped in the house for 48 hours, no one could get in or out. Luckily we had enough food. Ezra and I stayed in bed and read Jane Austen, so it was quite pleasant. But when we came downstairs again it was frightful; my chest of books floating in filthy water. Ezra was furious. Then we read a seventh-century-BC Chinese ode he had translated in St Elizabeth's hospital for the insane. It was called "The Planners' Raw Deal", about their inefficiency, and could have been written yesterday about the Italians.'

Sir Ashley and Lady Clarke are easily the most revered couple in Venice. Sir Ashley has all the gravitas and charm one expects of a former ambassador to Rome. Originally involved with the Italian Art and Archives Restoration Fund, which raised money for Florence as well as Venice, the Clarkes wanted to be on the spot when the fund became Venice in Peril. 'You can get nothing done in Italy unless you personally supervise progress every single day.' So they bought the ground floor and *piano nobile* of the Palazzo Bonlini from their Foreign Office friend, John Summers-Cox, and now have one of the finest gardens in Venice.

Lady Clarke is the inspiration behind the garden: 'The great problem with growing anything here is that we really *are* floating on salt water only six or seven inches underground. So plants with long burrowing roots are out.' She has, however, had considerable success with her clematis, her magnolia and even her mimosa. 'We have to slip every cutting into Italy. I wrap them carefully in my husband's pyjamas.'

Sir Ashley is currently presiding over the multi-national committee to restore the cathedral on Torcello. 'At last the locals are beginning to show a great deal of interest. What they're not showing yet is a great deal of lira.'

Efficency in the Italians is also found wanting by Ned and Joan Guinness. For them the vagaries of the Italian postal system are a constant headache. 'I would never trust *anything* to the Italian post,' says Mrs Guinness, citing as