

JEFF IN VENICE

Jeffrey Bernard had never been there before. He found, among other pleasures, the best cocktail he'd ever had

VENICE is wetter than I thought it would be. I didn't realise that you had to get a water taxi to the hotel, but then the nearest I've ever been to Italy before was shifting the scenery in *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. I had been booked into the Cipriani Hotel — at a cost I don't want to think about and, thank God, don't need to — but I must say that it was just about the best hotel I've ever stayed in: on a par with the Oriental Hotel in Bangkok. I took Sister Sally from the Middlesex Hospital with me. She's the nurse who looked after me when I had my hip reinforced with titanium.

Of course, I knew that Venice in a wheelchair was going to be a bit more than just difficult; and so it proved, since I wasn't even able to cross a bridge when I came to one, never mind before. Every time I had to get in or out of a water taxi — the Cipriani has its own — I had to be lifted and carried, since there weren't any gangplanks to be seen, and if there had been they would have been at too steep an angle. It was at those seemingly horribly perilous transfers from quay to boat and vice versa, suspended and dangling over the murky waters, that I kept pausing for split seconds to question in my mind the Italian temperament. Nearly every day in Soho for years now, I have seen the wild gesticulations of two Italians who haven't seen each other for five minutes, bumping into each other like long-lost friends, and on occasions it has looked to be as dramatic as an excerpt from *Aida*. One could be dropped like a hot cake.

The Cipriani welcomed us with red roses and champagne and they had even put fresh flowers in my bathroom. You might say so they should at those prices, but that's missing the point, which is surely to make you feel that they care a bit, which no one here seems to. I was too whacked to go out that first evening, so Sally wheeled me to the bar and the first of the ubiquitous cocktail pianists, playing 'Over The Rainbow', theme music from *Love Story*, etc.

Apart from being too tired to venture out — even being pushed about in a chair can be tiring — we ate in the hotel restaurant, since my brother had warned me that Venetian food is not up to much. More to the point, my godfather, Joe Links, a world authority on Venice, had also issued the same warning in his book, *Venice for Pleasure*. I had pasta, at Nigella prices, to see if it was much better done than in London — it was excellent without being remarkable.

The waiters busied themselves, much in the way that good Italian waiters do, which makes you think that they have been trained not to bump into each other; but I wish the wine waiters wouldn't fuss over Valpolicella as though they themselves had transformed it from water into wine. The staff wherever we went were fearfully good, since they actually like the job as opposed to resenting it as the British do.

The tea in the morning was quite drinkable. After that, we started our Grand Tour at the obvious spot — St Mark's

Square. The Café Florian was our first stop, and by its fading and ageing glass-covered murals I drank hot chocolate as thick as old muddy Mississippi. If all else fails, there will be plenty of money to be made in becoming a Venetian chocolate importer.

We set out for the back streets and the steps up and down to get to them, and I was a little disappointed to find that nearly every shop was a very expensive tourist shop — boutique may be the word — that somehow reminded me of that plant, the fly-trap. At not even too far a distance, the narrow streets looked to hold the promise of some congenial low life in the way of bars, but all

Ancient & modern

STEPHEN DORRELL, the Health Minister, has been claiming that it is not the cows that have been going mad in the latest BSE scare, but the people. It is a feeling the Romans would have shared.

In 427 BC, so the Roman historian Livy tells us, there was a terrible drought. Many cattle perished of thirst, but others were carried off 'by a scabies, which was contagious and spread to humans'. At first, he tells us, it infected country-dwellers and their workers, but then it spread to Rome itself. It did not merely affect their bodies either, 'but a horde of superstitions, mostly foreign, took possession of their minds as well'. The reason for this was that quack seers, spotting the chance to make a quick buck, encouraged the more simple-minded in the belief that, if they carried out certain new sacrificial rites, they could escape contagion.

As a result, mad oblation disease spread among the superstitious, and shrines and streets echoed with 'outlandish and unfamiliar sacrifices to appease the gods' anger'. When the authorities got to hear of it, they decided it was time to stop this 'public disgrace'. The aediles (city officers) were empowered to see to it that only Roman gods were worshipped, and in the traditional way.

The Romans were unable to deal with the disease, so turned to novel rituals to get the gods to deal with it. This approach is currently out of fashion. We turn to scientists instead. Given they have no cure for CJD (yet), one wonders if popular culture will, like the Romans, fill the gap with its own 'remedy', e.g. shooting cows, farmers, people, scientists or Stephen Dorrell. But it does not look as if 'organic' farming is the answer either. Who could be more 'organic' than the Romans?

Peter Jones

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they were selling, mostly anyway, were ham rolls and sandwiches. In one shop window I saw a shirt I fancied at the equivalent of £100. I told Sally to drive on.

Back in the Square and at the Quadri, a café opposite the Florian, I had my first drink of the day — a screwdriver made with the juice of blood oranges. If this Conservative Government has its way and I am not ever allowed to die, I shall remember it forever as being the best cocktail I have ever had. It had to be followed and it was chased to Harry's Bar, and if ever I hear anyone again recommending it because Ernest Hemingway or anyone else with a name of sorts used to use it I shall scream. I don't actually give a damn where Ernest Hemingway drank, ate or brought it all up, whether on the floor or blank sheets of writing paper, but I do strongly recommend Harry's Bar because of its ambience, its atmosphere, its good food and the fact that the staff allowed me to finish chasing that first screwdriver until I stopped for want of breath. The acidity of the orange juice is not good.

Early that evening, I somewhat reluctantly telephoned a man called Geoffrey Humphries who had left a message for me at the Cipriani, suggesting that we meet for a drink or something. I say somewhat reluctantly because just as I like to avoid unsolicited conversations with strangers in pubs so I am loath to be trapped by ex-pats in foreign climes. Anyway, we arranged to meet in the bar of the Cipriani, and Geof-

frey Humphries, accompanied by his girlfriend Holly, turned out to be a very welcome surprise — and we know how rare nice people are beyond Calais.

They suggested dinner and very unadventurously I opted to return to Harry's Bar. It is definitely the sort of place that attracts that awful species called 'regulars', partly because of the overrated bellinis. It is possibly addictive in its way. What made it even more special than the crêpes Suzettes that ended the meal was a handful of women who were generous enough to say that they had wanted to meet me, and for a couple of blissful minutes two of them waited at the bar to be introduced to me. That situation was a knockout, never mind the screwdrivers. Anyone who could sit through that happening to them without smiling at the absurdity of it all should be shot.

Geoffrey Humphries turned out to be a member of the Chelsea Arts Club too, although I'm sure he didn't learn how to be such a good host there. He also runs a private art school in Venice, as well as being a portrait artist himself. Holly slightly disconcerted me, reminding me as she did all the time of Lee Remick, whom I had seen two days before in a murder movie in which a pair of her knickers was produced in the courtroom scene dénouement. But now I remember them both as simply being the providers of a jolly evening in Venice.

It is impossible — for me anyway — not to be constantly aware of just how smart

and smooth Italian men can look. They struck me as being better-looking in their way and more urbane than even the French at their poshest at Longchamps races on a Sunday afternoon. They may not be, as I previously thought, a nation of waiters and operatic tenors, or even droppers of the disabled into canals.

It is a pity that Geoffrey Humphries and Holly live at the top of a lot of stairs; on the other hand, that may be why they kindly invited me to go back and stay with them some time. If ever I do go back, I shall certainly take some sunglasses with me, although I dislike wearing them. The light in Venice was blindingly white and bright and it may suit painters but I was bedazzled all day as the sunshine bounced off the water. I saw very few gondolas and what I did see of them struck me as extremely uncomfortable, not a vehicle in which to try to persuade a lady to play mouse to your cat.

I don't know if anyone has ever written a *Rough Guide to Venice*, but if they do, they should warn the reader to take about £100 a day — and that would be for staying in a fairly ordinary hotel. Perhaps it is appropriate that one should spend money like water in Venice. It would also be a good idea if travel writers in upmarket newspapers were obliged to mention what facilities, if any, there are for the disabled in the places they write about. I guessed Venice would be difficult, but it is high impossible. There must be such people as disabled Venetians. I wonder where they go. Down the drain?

CALL no man happy, said Solon a long time ago, till he dies: he is at best fortunate. Amen to that; but even the sternest moralist among us will agree that there is little control anyone can have exerted over whether he was born or not. In short, we are all victims of our parents' concupiscence.

We may not exercise much choice over our entry into this vale of tears, but we can at least choose an exit from it. Indeed, we may even exit to the applause of those who, even if I cannot call them our dearest, I can with justice and accuracy call our nearest. Many are my patients who, having decided to end it all with an excess of pills, are strengthened in their resolve by their consorts who, flinging an extra bottle or packet in their direction, encourage them with the words, 'Here, take the whole bloody lot, see if I care!'

I encountered a slight variation of this phenomenon last week. A young woman on my ward had taken to the pills to gain the upper hand in an argument with the person she called 'my partner', and who would now appear — in politically correct American medical notes — as her 'significant other'.

This person (what's in a name?)

If symptoms persist. . .

watched her take the pills, and when she had finished he told her that he loved his video more than her and always had done; then went down to the pub as usual.

She called the ambulance and while waiting for it to arrive she decided to avenge herself on the offending video.

'Has your boyfriend been to see you since you came to hospital?' I asked.

'Yes,' she replied.

'And what did he say?'

'My video's broke.'

'He's evidently a man of few words, your boyfriend,' I remarked.

'But I didn't mean to, doctor,' she said. 'I didn't mean to smash his video.'

'It was an accident, then?' I asked.

'Yes, an accident.'

'You accidentally smashed his video, after you had a row with him?'

'Yes, that's right.'

Well, accidents do happen, especially round here. For example, one of my

patients that very same day had given his wife a karate chop in the face.

'I can't remember nothing about it, doctor, except that she was being mouthy at the time.'

It is curious how these days it is the assaulted rather than the assaulter who seeks medical treatment.

'She's leading me to drink,' he said.

'How does she do that?'

'She drinks herself, and she knows I can't handle it. I've got to get away from where I'm living, doctor.'

'Why?' I asked.

'There's a pub over the road.'

He also took drugs — 'anythink I can get my hands on'.

He said that everywhere and everyone he knew was awash with drugs. How, then, could I expect him to stop?

'You've got to do something, doctor, this can't go on.'

I thought for a moment.

'I seem to have two choices,' I said. 'Either I close down every pub in England and hang every drug-dealer in the land from a lamppost, or I send you on your own to the Empty Quarter in Saudi Arabia. Which is it to be?'

Theodore Dalrymple