VERNON LEE

VANITAS: POLITE STORIES

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LADY TAL.

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The church of the Salute, with its cupolas and volutes, stared in at the long windows, white, luminous, spectral. A white carpet of moonlight stretched to where they were sitting, with only one lamp lit, for fear of mosquitoes. All the remoter parts of the vast drawing-room were deep in gloom; you were somehow conscious of the paintings and stuccos of the walls and vaulted ceilings without seeing them. From the canal rose plash of oar, gondolier's cry, and distant guitar twang and quaver of song; and from the balconies came a murmur of voices and women's laughter. The heavy scent of some flower, vague, white, southern, mingled with the cigarette smoke in that hot evening air, which seemed, by contrast to the Venetian day, almost cool.

As Jervase Marion lolled back (that lolling of his always struck one as out of keeping with his well-adjusted speech, his precise mind, the something conventional about him) on the ottoman in the shadow, he was conscious of a queer feeling, as if, instead of having arrived from London only two hours ago, he had never ceased to be here at Venice, and under Miss Vanderwerf's hospitable stuccoed roof. All those years of work, of success, of experience (or was it not rather of study?) of others, bringing with them a certain heaviness, baldness, and scepticism, had become almost a dream, and this present moment and the similar moment twelve years ago remaining as the only reality. Except his hostess, whose round, unchangeable face, the face of a world-wise, kind but somewhat frivolous baby, was lit up faintly by the regular puffs of her cigarette, all the people in the room were

strangers to Marion: yet he knew them so well, he had known them so long.

There was the old peeress, her head tied up in a white pocket-handkerchief, and lolling from side to side with narcoticised benevolence, who, as it was getting on towards other people's bedtime, was gradually beginning to wake up from the day's slumber, and to murmur eighteenth-century witticisms and Blessingtonian anecdotes. There was the American Senator, seated with postage-stamp profile and the attitude of a bronze statesman, against the moonlight, one hand in his waistcoat, the other incessantly raised to his ear as in a stately "Beg pardon?" There was the depressed Venetian naval officer who always made the little joke about not being ill when offered tea; the Roumanian Princess who cultivated the reputation of saying spiteful things cleverly, and wore all her pearls for fear of their tarnishing; the English cosmopolitan who was one day on the Bosphorus and the next in Bond Street, and was wise about singing and acting; the well turned out, subdued, Parisian-American æsthete talking with an English accent about modern pictures and ladies' dresses; and the awkward, enthusiastic English æsthete, who considered Ruskin a ranter and creaked over the marble floors with dusty, seven-mile boots. There was a solitary spinster fresh from higher efforts of some sort, unconscious that no one in Venice appreciated her classic profile, and that everyone in Venice stared at her mediæval dress and collar of coins from the British Museum. There was the usual bevy of tight-waisted Anglo-Italian girls ready to play the guitar and sing, and the usual supply of shy, young artists from the three-franc pensions, wandering round the room, candle in hand, with the niece of the house, looking with shy intentness at every picture and sketch and bronze statuette and china bowl and lacquer box.

The smoke of the cigarettes mingled with the heavy scent of the flowers; the plash of oar and snatch of song rose from the canal; the murmur and laughter entered from the balcony. The old peeress lolled out her Blessingtonian anecdotes; the Senator raised his hand to his ear and said "Beg pardon?" the Roumanian Princess laughed shrilly at her own malignant sayings; the hostess's face was periodically illumined by her cigarette and the hostess's voice periodically burst into a childlike: "Why, you don't mean it!" The young men and women flirted in undertones about Symonds, Whistler, Tolstoy, and the way of rowing gondolas, with an occasional chord struck on the piano, an occasional string twanged on the guitar. The Salute, with its cupolas and volutes, loomed spectral in at the windows; the moonlight spread in a soft, shining carpet to their feet.

Jervase Marion knew it all so well, so well, this half-fashionable, half-artistic Anglo-American idleness of Venice, with its poetic setting and its prosaic reality. He would have known it, he felt, intimately, even if he had never seen it before; known it so as to be able to make each of these people say in print what they did really say. There is something in being a psychological novelist, and something in being a cosmopolitan American, something in being an inmate of the world of Henry James and a kind of Henry James, of a lesser magnitude, yourself: one has the pleasure of understanding so much, one loses the pleasure of misunderstanding so much more.

A singing boat came under the windows of Palazzo Bragadin, and as much of the company as could, squeezed on to the cushioned gothic balconies, much to the annoyance of such as were flirting outside, and to the satisfaction of such as were flirting within. Marion—who, much to poor Miss Vanderwerf's disgust, had asked to be introduced to no one as yet, but to be allowed to realise that

evening, as he daintily put it, that Venice was the same and he a good bit changed—Marion leaned upon the parapet of a comparatively empty balcony and looked down at the canal. The moonbeams were weaving a strange, intricate pattern, like some old Persian tissue, in the dark water; further off the yellow and red lanterns of the singing boat were surrounded by black gondolas, each with its crimson, unsteady prow-light; and beyond, mysterious in the moonlight, rose the tower and cupola of St. George, the rigging of ships, and stretched a shimmering band of lagoon.

He had come to give himself a complete holiday here, after the grind of furnishing a three-volume novel for Blackwood (Why did he write so much? he asked himself; he had enough of his own, and to spare, for a dainty but frugal bachelor); and already vague notions of new stories began to arrive in his mind. He determined to make a note of them and dismiss them for the time. He had determined to be idle; and he was a very methodical man, valuing above everything (even above his consciousness of being a man of the world) his steady health, steady, slightly depressed spirits, and steady, monotonous, but not unmanly nor unenjoyable routine of existence.

Jervase Marion was thinking of this, and the necessity of giving himself a complete rest, not letting himself be dragged off into new studies of mankind and womankind; and listening, at the same time, half-unconsciously, to the scraps of conversation which came from the other little balconies, where a lot of heads were grouped, dark in the moonlight.

"I do hope it will turn out well—at least not too utterly awful," said the languid voice of a young English manufacturer's heir, reported to live exclusively off bread

and butter and sardines, and to have no further desires in the world save those of the amiable people who condescended to shoot on his moors, yacht in his yachts, and generally devour his millions, "it's ever so long since I've been wanting a sideboard. It's rather hard lines for a poor fellow to be unable to find a sideboard ready made, isn't it? And I have my doubts about it even now."

There was a faint sarcastic tinge in the languid voice; the eater of bread and butter occasionally felt vague amusement at his own ineptness.

"Nonsense, my dear boy," answered the cosmopolitan, who knew all about acting and singing; "it's sure to be beautiful. Only you must *not* let them put on that rococo cornice, quite out of character, my dear boy."

"A real rococo cornice is a precious lot better, I guess, than a beastly imitation Renaissance frieze cut with an oyster knife," put in a gruff New York voice. "That's my view, leastways."

"I think Mr. Clarence had best have it made in slices, and each of you gentlemen design him a slice—that's what's called original nowadays—*c'est notre façon d'entendre l'art aujourd'hui*," said the Roumanian Princess.

A little feeble laugh proceeded from Mr. Clarence. "Oh," he said, "I shouldn't mind that at all. I'm not afraid of my friends. I'm afraid of myself, of my fickleness and weak-mindedness. At this rate I shall never have a sideboard at all, I fear."

"There's a very good one, with three drawers and knobs, and a ticket 'garantito vero noce a lire 45,' in a joiner's shop at San Vio, which I pass every morning. You'd much better

have that, Mr. Clarence. And it would be a new departure in art and taste, you know."

The voice was a woman's; a little masculine, and the more so for a certain falsetto pitch. It struck Marion by its resolution, a sort of highbred bullying and a little hardness about it.

"Come, don't be cruel to poor Clarence, Tal darling," cried Miss Vanderwerf, with her kind, infantine laugh.

"Why, what have I been saying, my dear thing?" asked the voice, with mock humility; "I only want to help the poor man in his difficulties."

"By the way, Lady Tal, will you allow me to take you to Rietti's one day?" added an æsthetic young American, with a shadowy Boston accent; "he has some things you ought really to see, some quite good tapestries, a capital Gubbio vase. And he has a carved nigger really by Brustolon, which you ought to get for your red room at Rome. He'd look superb. The head's restored and one of the legs, so Rietti'd let him go for very little. He really is an awfully jolly bit of carving—and in that red room of yours——;"

"Thanks, Julian. I don't think I seem to care much about him. The fact is, I have to see such a lot of ugly white men in my drawing-room, I feel I really couldn't stand an ugly black one into the bargain."

Here Miss Vanderwerf, despite her solemn promise, insisted on introducing Jervase Marion to a lady of high literary tastes, who proceeded forthwith to congratulate him as the author of a novel by Randolph Tomkins, whom he abominated most of all living writers.

Presently there was a stir in the company, those of the balcony came trooping into the drawing-room, four or five young men and girls, surrounding a tall woman in a black walking-dress; people dropped in to these open evenings of Mrs. Vanderwerf's from their row on the lagoon or stroll at St. Mark's.

Miss Vanderwerf jumped up.

"You aren't surely going yet, dearest?" she cried effusively. "My darling child, it isn't half-past ten yet."

"I must go; poor Gerty's in bed with a cold, and I must go and look after her."

"Bother Gerty!" ejaculated one of the well turned out æsthetic young men.

The tall young woman gave him what Marion noted as a shutting-up look.

"Learn to respect my belongings," she answered, "I must really go back to my cousin."

Jervase Marion had immediately identified her as the owner of that rather masculine voice with the falsetto tone; and apart from the voice, he would have identified her as the lady who had bullied the poor young man in distress about his sideboard. She was very tall, straight, and strongly built, the sort of woman whom you instinctively think of as dazzlingly fine in a ball frock; but at the same time active and stalwart, suggestive of long rides and drives and walks. She had handsome aquiline features, just a trifle wooden in their statuesque fineness, abundant fair hair, and a complexion, pure pink and white, which told of superb health. Marion knew the type well. It was one which, despite all the years he had lived in England, made him feel

American, impressing him as something almost exotic. This great strength, size, cleanness of outline and complexion, this look of carefully selected breed, of carefully fostered health, was to him the perfect flower of the aristocratic civilization of England. There were more beautiful types, certainly, and, intellectually, higher ones (his experience was that such women were shrewd, practical, and quite deficient in soul), but there was no type more well-defined and striking, in his eyes. This woman did not seem an individual at all.

"I must go," insisted the tall lady, despite the prayers of her hostess and the assembled guests. "I really can't leave that poor creature alone a minute longer."

"Order the gondola, Kennedy; call Titta, please," cried Miss Vanderwerf to one of the many youths whom the kindly old maid ordered about with motherly familiarity.

"Mayn't I have the honour of offering mine?" piped the young man.

"Thanks, it isn't worth while. I shall walk." Here came a chorus of protestations, following the tall young woman into the outer drawing-room, through the hall, to the head of the great flight of open-air stairs.

Marion had mechanically followed the noisy, squabbling, laughing crew. The departure of this lady suggested to him that he would slip away to his inn.

"Do let me have the pleasure of accompanying you," cried one young man after another.

"*Do* take Clarence or Kennedy or Piccinillo, darling," implored Mrs. Vanderwerf. "You can't really walk home alone."

"It's not three steps from here," answered the tall one. "And I'm sure it's much more proper for a matron of ever so many years standing to go home alone than accompanied by a lot of fascinating young creatures."

"But, dear, you really don't know Venice; suppose you were spoken to! Just think."

"Well, beloved friend, I know enough Italian to be able to answer."

The tall lady raised one beautifully pencilled eyebrow, slightly, with a contemptuous little look. "Besides, I'm big enough to defend myself, and see, here's an umbrella with a silver knob, or what passes for such in these degenerate days. Nobody will come near that."

And she took the weapon from a rack in the hall, where the big seventeenth-century lamp flickered on the portraits of doges in crimson and senators in ermine.

"As you like, dearest. I know that wilful must have her own way," sighed Miss Vanderwerf, rising on tiptoe and kissing her on both cheeks.

"Mayn't I really accompany you?" repeated the various young men.

She shook her head, with the tall, pointed hat on it.

"No, you mayn't; good-night, dear friends," and she brandished her umbrella over her head and descended the stairs, which went sheer down into the moonlit yard. The young men bowed. One, with the air of a devotee in St. Mark's, kissed her hand at the bottom of the flight of steps, while the gondolier unlocked the gate. They could see him standing in the moonlight and hear him say earnestly:

"I leave for Paris to-morrow; good-night."

She did not answer him, but making a gesture with her umbrella to those above, she cried: "Good-night."

"Good-night," answered the chorus above the stairs, watching the tall figure pass beneath the gate and into the moonlit square.

"Well now," said Miss Vanderwerf, settling herself on her ottoman again, and fanning herself after her exertions in the drawing-room, "there is no denying that she's a strange creature, dear thing."

"A fine figure-head cut out of oak, with a good, solid, wooden heart," said the Roumanian Princess.

"No, no," exclaimed the lady of the house. "She's just as good as gold—poor Lady Tal!"

II.

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"Tal?" asked Marion.

"Tal. Her name's Atalanta, Lady Atalanta Walkenshaw—but everyone calls her Tal—Lady Tal. She's the daughter of Lord Ossian, you know."

"And who is or was Walkenshaw?—is, I presume, otherwise she'd have married somebody else by this time."

"Poor Tal!" mused Miss Vanderwerf. "I'm sure she would have no difficulty in finding another husband to make up for that fearful old Walkenshaw creature. But she's in a very sad position for so young a creature, poor girl."

"Ah!" ejaculated Marion, familiar with ladies thus to be commiserated, and remembering his friend's passion for romance, unquenchable by many seriocomic disenchantments, "separated from her husband—that sort of thing! I thought so."

"Now, why did you think that, you horrid creature?" asked his hostess eagerly. "Well, now, there's no saying that you're not *real* psychological, Jervase. Now *do* tell what made you think of such a thing."

"I don't know, I'm sure," answered Marion, suppressing a yawn. He hated people who pried into his novelist consciousness, all the more so that he couldn't in the least explain its contents. "Something about her—or nothing about her—a mere guess, a stupid random shot that happens to have hit right."

"Why, that's just the thing, that you haven't hit quite right. That is, it's right in one way, and wrong in another. Oh, my! how difficult it is just to explain, when one isn't a clever creature like you? Well, Lady Tal isn't separated from her husband, but it's just the same as if she were——;"

"I see. Mad? Poor thing!" exclaimed Marion with that air of concern which always left you in doubt whether it was utterly conventional, or might not contain a grain of sympathy after all.

"No, he's not mad. He's dead—been dead ever so long. She's one and thirty, you know—doesn't look it, does she?—and was married at eighteen. But she can't marry again, for

all that, because if she marries all his money goes elsewhere, and she's not a penny to bless herself with."

"Ah—and why didn't she have proper settlements made?" asked Marion.

"That's just it. Because old Walkenshaw, who was a beast—just a beast—had a prejudice against settlements, and said he'd do much better for his wife than that—leave her everything, if only they didn't plague him. And then, when the old wretch died, after they'd been married a year or so, it turned out that he had left her everything, but only on condition of her not marrying again. If she did, it would all go to the next of kin. He hated the next of kin, too, they say, and wanted to keep the money away from him as long as possible, horrid old wretch! So there poor Tal is a widow, but unable to marry again."

"Dear me!" ejaculated Marion, looking at the patterns which the moonlight, falling between the gothic balcony balustrade, was making on the shining marble floor; and reflecting upon the neat way in which the late Walkenshaw had repaid his wife for marrying him for his money; for of course she had married him for his money. Marion was not a stoic, or a cynic, or a philosopher of any kind. He fully accepted the fact that the daughters of Scotch lords should marry for money, he even hated all sorts of sentimental twaddle about human dignity. But he rather sympathised with this old Walkenshaw, whoever Walkenshaw might have been, who had just served a mercenary young lady as was right.

"I don't see that it's so hard, aunt," said Miss Vanderwerf's niece, who was deeply in love with Bill Nettle, a penniless etcher. "Lady Tal might marry again if she'd learn to do without all that money."

"If she would be satisfied with only a little less," interrupted the sharp-featured Parisian-American whom Mrs. Vanderwerf wanted for a nephew-in-law. "Why, there are dozens of men with plenty of money who have been wanting to marry her. There was Sir Titus Farrinder, only last year. He mayn't have had as much as old Walkenshaw, but he had a jolly bit of money, certainly."

"Besides, after all," put in the millionaire in distraction about the sideboard, "why should Lady Tal want to marry again? She's got a lovely house at Rome."

"Oh, come, come, Clarence!" interrupted Kennedy horrified; "why, it's nothing but Japanese leather paper and Chinese fans."

"I don't know," said Clarence, crestfallen. "Perhaps it isn't lovely. I thought it *rather* pretty—don't you really think it *rather* nice, Miss Vanderwerf?"

"Any house would be nice enough with such a splendid creature inside it," put in Marion. These sort of conversations always interested him; it was the best way of studying human nature.

"Besides," remarked the Roumanian Princess, "Lady Tal may have had enough of the married state. And why indeed should a beautiful creature like that get married? She's got every one at her feet. It's much more amusing like that——;"

"Well, all the same, I *do* think it's just terribly sad, to see a creature like that condemned to lead such a life, without anyone to care for or protect her, now poor Gerald Burne's dead."

"Oh, her brother—her brother—do you suppose she cared for *him*?" asked the niece, pouring out the iced lemonade

and Cyprus wine. She always rebelled against her aunt's romanticalness.

"Gerald Burne!" said Marion, collecting his thoughts, and suddenly seeing in his mind a certain keen-featured face, a certain wide curl of blond hair, not seen for many a long year. "Gerald Burne! Do you mean an awfully handsome young Scotchman, who did something very distinguished in Afghanistan? You don't mean to say he was any relation of Lady Atalanta's? I never heard of his being dead, either. I thought he must be somewhere in India."

"Gerald Burne was Lady Tal's half-brother—her mother had married a Colonel Burne before her marriage with Lord Ossian. He got a spear-wound or something out in Afghanistan," explained one of the company.

"I thought it was his horse," interrupted another.

"Anyhow," resumed Miss Vanderwerf, "poor Gerald was crippled for life—a sort of spinal disease, you know. That was just after old Sir Thomas Walkenshaw departed, so Tal and he lived together and went travelling from one place to another, consulting doctors, and that sort of thing, until they settled in Rome. And now poor Gerald is dead—he died two years ago—Tal's all alone in the world, for Lord Ossian's a wretched, tipsy, bankrupt old creature, and the other sisters are married. Gerald was just an angel, and you've no idea how devoted poor Tal was to him—he was just her life, I do believe."

The young man called Ted looked contemptuously at his optimistic hostess.

"Well," he said, "I don't know whether Lady Tal cared much for her brother while he was alive. My belief is she never cared a jackstraw for anyone. Anyway, if she *did* care for

him you must admit she didn't show it after his death. I never saw a woman look so utterly indifferent and heartless as when I saw her a month later. She made jokes, I remember, and asked me to take her to a curiosity shop. And she went to balls in London not a year afterwards."

The niece nodded. "Exactly. I always thought it perfectly indecent. Of course Aunt says it's Tal's way of showing her grief, but it's a very funny one, anyhow."

"I'm sure Lady Tal must regret her brother," said the Roumanian Princess. "Just think how convenient for a young widow to be able to say to all the men she likes: 'Oh, do come and see poor Gerald.'"

"Well, well!" remarked Miss Vanderwerf. "Of course she did take her brother's death in a very unusual way. But still I maintain she's not heartless for all that."

"Hasn't a pretty woman a right to be heartless, after all?" put in Marion.

"Oh, I don't care a fig whether Lady Tal is heartless or not," answered Ted brusquely. "Heartlessness isn't a social offence. What I object to most in Lady Tal is her being so frightfully mean."

"Mean?"

"Why, yes; avaricious. With all those thousands, that woman manages to spend barely more than a few hundreds."

"Well, but if she's got simple tastes?" suggested Marion.

"She hasn't. No woman was ever further from it. And of course it's so evident what her game is! She just wants to

feather her nest against a rainy day. She's putting by five-sixths of old Walkenshaw's money, so as to make herself a nice little *dot*, to marry someone else upon one of these days."

"A judicious young lady!" observed Marion.

"Well, really, Mr. Kennedy," exclaimed the Roumanian Princess, "you are ingenious and ingenuous! Do you suppose that our dear Tal is putting by money in order to marry some starving genius, to do love in a cottage with? Why, if she's not married yet, it's merely because she's not met a sufficient *parti*. She wants something very grand—a *Pezzo Grosso*, as they say here."

"She couldn't marry as long as she had Gerald to look after," said Miss Vanderwerf, fanning herself in the moonlight. "She was too fond of Gerald."

"She was afraid of Gerald, that's my belief, too," corrected the niece. "Those big creatures are always cowards. And Gerald hated the notion of her making another money marriage, though he seems to have arranged pretty well to live on old Walkenshaw's thousands."

"Of course Gerald wanted to keep her all for himself; that was quite natural," said Miss Vanderwerf; "but I think that as long as he was alive she did not want anyone else. She thought only of him, poor creature——;"

"And of a score of ball and dinner-parties and a few hundred acquaintances," put in Ted, making rings with the smoke of his cigarette.

"And now," said the Princess, "she's waiting to find her *Pezzo Grosso*. And she wants money because she knows that a *Pezzo Grosso* will marry a penniless girl of eighteen,