Mr Fenman's Farewell

to His Readers

Michael Allen

This extraordinary memoir by
Thomas Fenman (1761-1837)
is now published for the first time

Who is the mysterious Madame de Mentou? And what is her real name? These are the questions which the writer Thomas Fenman addresses in a brief memoir which was written a few months before his death.

Fenman, who lived from 1761-1837, had a long and successful career as a novelist. But, although famous and widely read in his day, he was soon forgotten after his death. Now his puzzling memoir is made available in print for the first time.

In a scholarly introduction, Michael Allen describes how he came to own the original manuscript of Thomas Fenman's *Farewell,* and gives an account of what is known of Fenman's life.

'Mr Fenman provides a warm and affectionate portrait of a most unusual woman.' Patrick Read

'Thomas Fenman was once as famous as Jeffrey Archer or Terry Pratchett, and this brief account of his two visits to Venice gives a fascinating insight into his working methods.' Anne Moore

Mr Fenman’s Farewell to His Readers

Fiction by Michael Allen

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Mr Fenman's Farewell to His Readers

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INTRODUCTION

THE LARGER PART of this chapbook, beginning on page 16, consists of a short memoir by the late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century English novelist, Thomas Fenman (1761-1837).

Fenman's memoir dates from 1836, and in it he claims that it is the last piece of prose that he wrote with a view to publication. He states within the text that he intended to leave it with his will and other papers, for possible publication after his death, but only if his executors saw fit.

The memoir consists principally of an account of the author's visit to Venice in 1786. He returned to Venice exactly fifty years later, and he tells us briefly what he experienced during the first few days of that second visit. We now know, from his obituary, that he stayed in Venice until February 1837, when he died.

Fenman himself gives no title to his last piece of prose, but for convenience I have provided one which I believe describes it well: *Mr Fenman's Farewell to His Readers.*

In a sense the memoir speaks for itself, and there is no need for anyone to read this introduction at all, either before or after reading the *Farewell.* However, I think that such few

readers as ever make the *Farewell's* acquaintance will be assisted in understanding it if I set it in context. In this introduction I shall therefore provide:

(i) an explanation as to how the original holograph came into my possession;

(ii) a statement as to how and why the text comes to be published now, for the first time;

(iii) a brief account of Fenman's life and work; and

(iv) some comments on the memoir itself.

(i) How the memoir came into my possession

It has long been an ambition of mine to own an inky – an inky being the affectionate book-trade term for an incunabulum, or incunable: that is to say, a book printed before the year 1501.

Of course, such books are both rare and valuable, and it is unlikely that I shall ever come across even an exceptionally battered example which falls within my price range. Nevertheless, I persist in looking.

One afternoon, some fifteen years ago, I was poking around in a dusty bookshop in Stamford (England) when the owner asked me, perhaps hoping to close for the day, whether he could help. I told him what I was looking for, and he shook his head.

'Oh no,' he said. 'No inkies. In fact there's not much here of any great age at all. But I'll tell you what I have got. I've got some early nineteenth-century manuscripts relating to a

writer who used to live around these parts. There's his will, I believe, and a notebook.'

He disappeared into a back room, where I could see him working his way hopefully through an enormous pile of junk. It took him some time, but eventually he emerged with a modern envelope file. He opened it up, and showed me what he had.

Inside the file was an old notebook, half-bound in leather, with a marbled cover. There was also a folded document which was written on some stiff and thick paper in a narrowly spaced hand. Finally, there was a very old and faded newspaper cutting.

One glance showed me that the folded document would take some deciphering. The notebook, on the other hand, was written in a beautifully clear copperplate, and a note on the inside cover stated firmly that it belonged to Thomas Fenman.

'Ever heard of Fenman?' asked the bookseller.

I had not, but the bookseller didn't seem surprised.

'Fenman,' he said, 'was an early novelist. He had quite a following in his lifetime, but he is completely forgotten now.'

He stood there, jingling coins in his pocket, while I gave the material a quick once-over.

'Shall we say five pounds?' he asked, clearly wanting to be rid of me.

'Oh yes,' I replied, and coughed up.

Thus it was that I came to be the owner of the manuscript of what I believe to be Thomas Fenman's last work. It was

written out, with many corrections, in a notebook which fell into my possession almost entirely by accident. I also acquired a copy of his will (the folded document), and the press cutting proved to be an obituary.

(ii) How the memoir comes to be published now

When I arrived home I eagerly read the text which was contained in Thomas Fenman's notebook; and I read it several times more over the next few years. Every once in a while I would come across the notebook in my cupboard, and become fascinated by it all over again.

I discovered, as many have before me, that there is something thrilling about possessing the actual handwritten text of a long-dead author's work – even if, as in this case, he is a forgotten, minor writer, and the text is an untypical example of his output.

After my first reading I did some research and soon discovered that, as far as I could tell, Mr Fenman's memoir had never appeared in print. And, of course, the possibility of publishing it for the first time soon crossed my mind. But the memoir was far too short to be published in book form; no publisher would have been remotely interested. And although I could have offered it to some academic journal, I am not an academic, and I have no connections in that field. Furthermore, the longer I had the notebook in my possession, the more pronounced became my sense of ownership. I didn't particularly want to have some gang of academics tak-

ing it from me and putting their dirty paw prints all over it.

Time passed. We entered the digital age. And I began to realise that there were now new possibilities: possibilities which had been largely undreamed of when I first bought Mr Fenman's last notebook.

Finally, in early 2007, and after one or two experiments with my own work, I decided to make Mr Fenman's *Farewell* available in digital form; I decided to issue it in the form of a free pdf file. This file is not a reproduction of the original handwritten text, but a typed-out version, with all the corrections incorporated into an easily legible format. And, since it is now possible to print short chapbooks for publication on a print-on-demand basis, I also decided to make the work available to readers in printed form, as and when a copy was required. I have done this though the facilities of Lulu.com, where the expenditure required is negligible.

(iii) A brief account of Thomas Fenman's life

As you will see when you come to read the memoir (if you have not done so already), Fenman provides some autobiographical details himself. I shall try not to repeat too much of that here. But there are some other details which I have obtained from his obituary, and from one other source.

The newspaper cutting that came with Fenman's notebook proved to be a clipping from an 1837 issue of the *Peterborough Citizen and Advertiser*. This carried a report of Fenman's death in Venice, and provided some account of

his life.

As Fenman himself relates, he was born in Northamptonshire, the son of a country Vicar. His father died when he was young, and he was sent to school, as a boarder, in the nearby town of Oundle. Subsequently he attended Queens' College, Cambridge. A short period as a schoolteacher in Norwich followed.

At the age of twenty-three, however, Fenman's life was transformed as a result of a substantial legacy. This gave him an assured income, and enabled him to embark on the kind of 'grand tour' of Europe which was often undertaken by the sons of wealthy families.

Fenman's memoir makes it abundantly clear that he had for some time had the ambition to be a novelist, and he relates how, in the winter of 1786/87, while staying in Venice, he completed his first novel. He was helped in this by the mysterious Madame de Mentou, who is the central figure in the memoir.

On his return to England, Fenman set up a publishing relationship, which appears to have lasted more or less unchanged for the next fifty years. He returned to Northamptonshire, where he eventually bought a large house in Oundle. (The house still stands, and is currently owned by Oundle School.) Here Fenman lived for the rest of his days.

Most of his time was spent in writing, and the catalogue of the British Library reveals that he did indeed, as he claimed, write a hundred novels. He himself gives us the fla-

vour of these books, and describes what motivated him to write them, so we do not need to consider that here.

But Thomas Fenman was also, according to the *Peterborough Citizen and Advertiser*, a great countryman, spending many hours walking or riding in the local countryside. He was a keen angler, and was renowned as a pike fisherman, with several catches of over twenty pounds.

Fenman's career as a writer is now almost completely obscure. Although he had no need to earn an income from writing, he never set out to be anything other than a popular novelist, aiming his work at schoolboys and students, plus the less discerning members of the middle-class readership. His books seem to have been particularly popular in the commercial lending libraries, which were an increasingly important factor in publishing in his active years.

Few references to Fenman can be found in the histories of the English novel, though James Staveley-Wilson, in his 1953 survey of early English fiction, makes the point that Fenman's name seldom occurs in the prestigious literary journals of his day; and when he is mentioned, the tone is invariably disparaging.

Staveley-Wilson describes Fenman as 'one of a surprisingly large army of journeymen hacks, who churned out constant supplies of blood-and-thunder stories, or romantic melodrama, to satisfy the demands of those who were literate but unsophisticated. His work was much admired by the young and inexperienced, but derided by the arbiters of taste and quality.'

After his death, Fenman seems to have faded rapidly from public attention. An 1857 article in the *Spectator* refers to him as follows: 'Once famous (or, more properly, infamous) for his wildly popular fictions, Fenman's work now seems hopelessly dated and old-fashioned.'

In short, it seems that Fenman's career (followed by his rapid eclipse after death) was a precursor for the pattern exhibited in later years by a considerable number of once popular and widely read authors. In the 1880s, for example, Fergus Hume's novel *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* sold in vast numbers, and Hume was subsequently both prolific and successful; but today he is totally unknown to all but a few literary historians. In the twentieth century, Sidney Horler also wrote a hundred novels, which sold literally in millions, but his name is long forgotten.

So complete is Fenman's obscurity that not even the most desperate PhD student, in search of someone on whom to base his thesis, has seen fit to unearth him. Neither has any academic, teaching the history of the English novel, and keen to secure tenure, produced a research paper on Fenman's use of semi-colons. At the time of writing this introduction, even a search for "Thomas Fenman" on Google produced a nil result.

Fenman, it is reported, married at the age of forty. His wife was a widow of his own age, but there were no children and the lady died ten years later.

On death, lacking heirs, Fenman made generous bequests to his servants, and left the bulk of his money to his old

school and his old college. He requested that these institutions should use the funds to finance scholarships for able boys from poor homes. Neither school nor college can now identify the way in which the funds were actually used, and neither saw fit to preserve Fenman's name by attaching it to a particular award or building. However, the official historians of both institutions make brief references to Fenman as a 'generous benefactor'.

The librarian of Queens' College, Cambridge, was able to supply one further piece of information. The College Library holds the diary of a nineteenth-century Fellow who was fond of gossip, and the diarist records Mr Fenman visiting the College 'again'. There is a passing reference to him as 'the scourge of widows everywhere, a man without fear or scruple in their seduction.' This, we may assume, is a slight exaggeration. However, Fenman gives us his own account of his affair, as a young man, with a widow older than himself, so perhaps he repeated that pattern of behaviour later in life.

(iv) Some comments on the *Farewell*

Mr Fenman's short memoir is, as you will see, somewhat peculiar in certain respects.

He himself presents the text to us as an honest record of what happened to him, in Venice, in 1786 and 1836. It is, he claims, a statement of absolute truth. He is prepared to swear to that, he says, 'by all that you and I hold holy'. Yet demonstrably the story cannot be true. Not, that is, unless

you are prepared to accept the ideas of some modern quantum theorists, who argue for the existence of various parallel universes, which may or may not interact with ours.

A second possibility, as Fenman himself declares, is that the story is fiction from start to finish. The author points out, in the text, that it was common in the eighteenth century, and later, for fiction to be dressed up as fact: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* being a case in point. So it may well be that his 'memoir' is in fact a complete invention.

If that is the case, then Thomas Fenman may have been a forerunner of the postmodernists. Perhaps the whole of his last work was simply a conceit – one last joke, a puzzle created by an old man to create head-scratching and earnest debate, at a later date, among such as myself.

Even in 1836, Fenman may have understood full well that one day there would be whole factories full of academics, churning out useless pieces of 'research' on topics which are of not the slightest value to anyone. And perhaps he decided, as he sat through his last autumn and winter, that he would provide for them a little conundrum: he would leave behind him (choose your own clichéd metaphor) some grist for their academic mill; or something for them to chew on.

Finally, there is a third possibility. This third possibility is also faced by Fenman, in the course of telling us his tale.

It is possible, he tells us, that he is sincerely and reliably narrating what he believes to have happened, and is telling what he honestly believes to be true – but that, like many an old man before him, he is beginning to suffer from the early

stages of what we now call Alzheimer's disease. At the start of his memoir, Fenman calls for assistance from his memory. But perhaps, he admits later on, perhaps his memory betrays him.

I refrain here from telling you my own conclusion. I think you will derive more interest and enjoyment from what follows if you read it with an open mind; and then, at the end of it all, make your own judgement.

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Mr Fenman's Farewell to His Readers

O Muse, great mistress, please assist me now!
O memory, that noted what I saw,
Here shall your value be made plain to all.

THERE WAS PLAGUE in Venice that year. But I did not leave.

I might well have left; I had every intention of doing so. But I was dissuaded by Madame de Mentou.

I had arrived in Venice in early September 1786, just fifty years ago, to the week, as I write these words. I took rooms in a hotel while I looked around for a house to rent for the winter.

At first, all seemed well. True, the bells of the church nearby were for ever ringing; and there seemed to be frequent funerals. But I paid little attention, being distracted by the sights and sounds of a new and extraordinary city.

But then I began to notice (or fancied I did) that the hotel staff were muttering to themselves in the corridors. They had quiet conversations which I could not quite hear, and which in any case were hastily broken off as I approached. And finally, of course, I was told the truth by my French friend, Monsieur Charleroi.

Monsieur Charleroi had been in Venice for some time.

Like me, he was a young man on the grand tour, and he had kindly acted as something of a guide to me in my early days. But one afternoon, when I returned to the hotel after a walk, I found him surrounded by bags in the lobby.

'Monsieur Charleroi,' I exclaimed in surprise. 'Surely you are not leaving?'

'I am,' he said abruptly. 'And so should you.'

He pulled me to one side, where we could not be overheard. 'You remember,' he enquired, 'the manager of this hotel, the man who admitted you when you first arrived?'

'I remember him well.'

Monsieur Charleroi nodded. 'Three days ago he was as cheerful as you or I. Today he is dead.'

I was shocked into silence. 'It is la peste,' Charleroi whispered to me. 'The plague. You understand? You should leave at once.'

At this, my heart beat faster and I am sure that the blood faded from my cheeks. The plague! Something like panic filled my mouth with hot saliva, and I became as wide-eyed and pale as Charleroi himself.

Charleroi said no more, apart from, 'Be warned, mon ami,' and he continued his arrangements to depart. And I, after bidding him farewell, went upstairs to my room to consider what to do.

Now I was nothing in those days if not a well trained English gentleman; and while I had a healthy sense of concern for my own welfare, I also thought of others. And I immediately remembered Madame de Mentou, the French lady to

whom I had been introduced by Charleroi himself a week or so earlier.

I went downstairs to find that Charleroi had already gone, depriving me of the opportunity to ask him if he had spoken to Madame de Mentou already. So, in case he had not, and filled with a sense of civic duty, I immediately left the hotel and made my way to the house where the lady was living.

At the door I was told that Madame was with her dressmaker, and that it was not convenient for me to call, but I rudely demanded to see her anyway, insisting that it was an urgent matter. Eventually I was admitted, albeit with a great deal of tutting and handwaving in protest.

Fortunately, Madame de Mentou was quite unflustered by my sudden entry – though few ladies, I am sure, would have welcomed my intrusion upon such an important domestic scene. Venice, I had already been told, was particularly demanding in the number of dresses that a lady must have, and the seamstress was down on her knees, with a mouthful of pins, when I burst in upon them.

'Why Mr Fenman,' said Madame. 'How kind of you to honour us with your presence.'

The gentle irony, and the implicit (and deserved) rebuke, went unnoticed.

'Madame,' I blurted out. 'We must leave Venice at once!'

Madame turned to look at me. '*Must* we?' she enquired. And she gave me one of her mocking smiles. It was clear that she, at least, was not about to panic, no matter how dreadful the news. 'And why would we do that?'

I took the liberty – quite unlike a nervous and callow young Englishman – of approaching her closely and whispering in her ear, so that the seamstress should not hear.

'It is not safe,' I told her. 'There is plague in the city.'

I stepped back, astounded by my own boldness.

Madame took the news with remarkable calmness. 'Is that so?' she said. 'And you believe we should leave?'

'Yes.'

'And where do you think we should go, Mr Fenman?'

This was not an unreasonable question, but it was one which, in the ten minutes or so it had taken me to rush to her house, I had not had the wit to address.

'Why, anywhere,' I spluttered. 'Rome, Paris, London. Anywhere will be safer than here.'

Madame gave me one of her marvellous laughs; her face lit up with amusement. 'And what makes you think that?'

'Why… because there is no… There is not the same… not the same risk there as there is here.'

Madame moved her position, to allow the seamstress to work on a different part of the dress, around the waist.

'Do you really think so, Mr Fenman? Does no one ever die, then, in Rome, or Paris, or London?'

I was beginning to feel foolish. I could feel myself going red.

Madame was enjoying my discomfiture immensely. 'I perceive, Mr Fenman, that you do not know the story that the Arabs tell, about the man who tried to run away from Death.'

I did not know it then, though I have heard it several times since, and indeed have used it in my own work. So Madame proceeded to tell me.

In this story, a rich man in Baghdad sends his servant to the marketplace to buy food. But almost immediately the servant comes back, empty-handed and trembling with fear. He tells his master that in the marketplace he bumped into a pale-faced man, whom he recognised as Death – and, what was worse, says the servant, Death recognised him and made a threatening gesture.

The servant begs his master to let him take a horse, and he gallops away to Samarra, which is far enough away, he believes, for him to be safe.

Later, the rich man goes into the town himself, and he too meets the pale-faced man. Taking his courage in both hands, the rich man asks Death why he had made the threatening gesture to his servant.

'That was not a threatening gesture,' says Death. 'It was merely an expression of surprise. I was astonished to come across your servant here in Baghdad, for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.'

Madame laughed out loud when she had finished this story, as if it amused her greatly. And she clearly was not remotely alarmed by the prospect of plague in Venice.

'So you see, Mr Fenman,' Madame continued, 'it would be quite wrong to think that you might do yourself any good by running away from here.'

She approached me, a warm smile on her face: a smile

which filled me with admiration and longing. How fortunate I was that this beautiful and sophisticated woman should see fit even to converse with me.

Madame placed her hand on my shoulder, to reassure me.

'While you are in this city, Mr Fenman, you should think of yourself as being under my protection. No harm will come to you here, I promise you that.'

The seamstress had now either finished her work, or had given up the attempt in the face of my distractions, and was packing away her things.

'And besides, you have work to do here in Venice. And so have I. We shall work together.' She smiled again. 'I have decided to take you under my wing, Mr Fenman. And when I take a young man under my wing, he tends to do rather well. In fact, very well indeed.'

And then she came closer still, and kissed me full on the lips.

After that, of course, I remained.

*

It is said that, in 1347, two thirds of the population of Venice died of the plague; there was no one left to bury the dead.

In 1630, one third perished. Sometimes 500 citizens died in one day, and 80,000 in all. Doge Nicolo Contarini, in the name of the Senate, made a solemn vow that, if only the Virgin would free the city from the terrible disease, he would build a magnificently ornate church to the Madonna of Good

Health. The Virgin duly obliged: hence Santa Maria della Salute.

But in 1786, if plague there was (and I never discovered the truth of that), it died away with the last heat of the summer. The funeral bells rang less frequently. Or so it seemed.

And now, as I said before, I am here in Venice again, fifty years after my first arrival. And it is time, I think, for me to tell you a story. Yes, dear Reader, yet another story, in a lifetime which I have filled with stories.

The story that I have to tell you today is a strange one, and it presents to the reader an unusual problem. Is the story that I tell you true – in the sense that I tell you what really happened? Or is it just another of my fictions, a made-up tale for the entertainment of readers?

For my part I insist that every word of it is true. But then so did Mr Defoe, when writing *Robinson Crusoe*. And so did Swift, after him. And both, despite the obvious impossibility of their tales (one footprint on the sand, indeed; and men six inches tall), they were believed in every particular.

So, my insistence that I tell you the truth is not enough. I may be dissembling. And you may think me a liar if you wish, for that is certainly possible, and I shall not take offence.

In any event, even if you allow that I am telling you the truth, as best I remember it, we must both acknowledge that I am dependent upon memory. And the memories of old men are seldom trustworthy. They may believe that they tell you the truth about what happened, but they may be misre-

membering.

Worse, they may be deliberately embroidering upon the facts, for dramatic effect. And who would be better placed to do that than I? I who am universally regarded (at least by the undiscerning) as a master of the art of fiction.

But there is another possibility here – at least one; possibly more – and that is that what you have here is the ramblings of a very old man, whose mind has begun to fray at the edges.

Before I left England for Venice, a few weeks ago, I went to see a number of old friends. Or I now think that I did. But perhaps those visits were part of my delusion. (And perhaps I am not really here in Venice at all, but tucked up in bed in Northamptonshire.)

One of these old friends, to whom I believe I spoke, talked to me for a solid hour, and with scarcely a word of interruption from me. And he spoke with perfect lucidity, and clear recall. He spoke quite frequently of his son, and told me how his son had recently done this, and done that; and been both here and there; and had plans to do the other, and to go elsewhere after that. And yet my old friend's son, as I well know (or think I do), has been dead these ten long years.

One of us – my friend, or me; or possibly both – is beginning to wander into the realms of confusion, as so many old men do.

Even within the framework of truth and good intentions, I must select the memories which serve my purpose best, for to relate every detail would be tedious. And I may therefore

choose not to spell out my conclusions about what happened too clearly. For a little intrigue adds spice to the reading; and to state the obvious is wearisome. So I may not always tell you everything.

I have reached my own conclusions, you see, about Madame de Mentou. But it will be more interesting, I think, if I do not spell out those conclusions in full; and certainly not too soon. To spell them out at all would be to break the spell.

This story, I must add in all honesty, is different from the vast majority of my work in that I make no attempt to intensify the drama, or to invent incidents. One of your guarantees of its truth, apart from my own word of (doubtful) honour, is that the story lacks sensation, is dull to the point of tedium (unless you happen to have literary ambitions), lacks credibility, and will tax your patience.

But that, dear Reader, is my defence. That which is true sometimes seems unbelievable, and that which is believable, in the context of a novel, must by no means, perforce, be true.

*

I was born in Wadenhoe, Northamptonshire, the only son of a clergyman (though I had two younger sisters). My name alone reveals my modest origins, for it cannot be too many generations ago, I believe, that my forefathers laboured in the fens of East Anglia, probably in the most modest and menial of capacities.

Ah yes, the fens. I know them well. Stretching from Whittlesey to the Wash, the fens are that vast, watery area of land below sea level, heavily flooded in winter, only half dry in summer. It is an area of river, mere, and endless reed-beds. The waters teem with fish; the air is black with fowl.

The families who live in those parts are as primitive and savage, I wager, as any tribe in Africa. Their homes are peat-built hovels, with horn-paned windows and an earthen floor, a hole in the roof for the smoke; their children run half naked. Their food is what they can catch. They survive by the glaive (a pure Saxon word for an eel-spear) and the fish-net; they eat water-rats. And the men wear gold earrings, for the earring guarantees long sight. These people know no lords or masters, for few would venture into the treacherous, ague-ridden swamps to challenge them. It was here that Hereward the Wake, Lord of Bourne, last defender of the Saxons, hid and harassed the Normans.

The likelihood is that, like most of their kind, my ancestors were none too bright. But one of them must have dragged himself up out of this wilderness, impressed somebody, somewhere, with his intelligence, and earned himself an education. For three generations thereafter, until me, the Fenman sons were clergymen.

My father died when I was ten, leaving his widow with no means of support. She must have had a bitter time of it, but I saw little of her struggles. Somehow or other I was given a scholarship to the school at Oundle, five miles away. And from the age of ten, until I was seventeen, I spent most of my

time there.

I enjoyed school life, and was passably good at academic work; though I was painfully conscious that many of the boys came from families with far greater wealth than mine. And when the time came to leave school and go elsewhere, I was once again fortunate in that money was found from a scholarship fund to send me to Queens' College, Cambridge.

After Cambridge I might reasonably have been expected to go into the church, like my Fenman forebears. But I had already lost my faith. Acquaintance with the ancient world of Greece and Rome had turned me into a pagan; though a discreet one. Neither did I fancy the law, or medicine, or, gods forbid, the Army. So, for want of any better idea, and for need of earning a living, I became a schoolmaster.

I took a post at King Edward's School, Norwich. Shortly afterwards, my mother died, though not before she had safely arranged marriages for her two daughters – marriages in which, I may say, the girls were as contented and comfortable as can reasonably be expected.

I spent three years in the schoolmasterly trade, enjoying it, for what it was worth, but earning little money and with the prospect of a thoroughly dull life ahead of me.

But then – like an invention in one of my own novels – a letter arrived from a firm of solicitors in London. It seemed that my mother had had a distant cousin – distant in every sense: she lived in Yorkshire. And she had died.

The lady was a woman of considerable substance: or rather, her husband had been. And there was a will, natu-

rally, which left all the money to their two sons. But the sons were dead, and there were no heirs – or, if there were, they were all dead too. I never mastered the details, and why should I, for it was as if I were the sole survivor of a tontine. All that mattered to me was that I had inherited a vast fortune.

Well, I say vast. It seemed vast to me, but when I visited the solicitors they told me of other estates that they had handled, and I realised that the sums involved in my case were only vast if you were the son of an indigent clergyman, and were currently scuffling a living as a teacher of unruly boys.

In any event, the net result was that I need never work again. I could become, if I so desired, a gentleman of leisure. A man without money, the Venetians say, is a walking corpse. Well, now I had come alive.

I spent a year organising my life. I gave away money to my two sisters, most of which was well applied in furthering their husbands' business interests. And I spent several months organising a grand tour for myself.

In the eighteenth century it was common for the sons of wealthy families to spend a year, or perhaps several years, touring Europe. The purpose of this was to acquire a knowledge of history and geography (both useful for war and trade); to enlarge one's circle of social contacts (useful for advantageous marriages); and to acquaint oneself with the finer aspects of painting, sculpture, music, and so forth.

For my part, I considered that the grand tour would give

me a much-needed source of inspiration and background for my novels. Oh yes, dear Reader, I must now confess it – I had, since the age of fifteen or so, nurtured a strong ambition to become a writer. And even at the young and tender age of twenty-three, I understood that I really did not know much about the world at large; and not all that much about the places in which I had so far lived and moved and had my being. It was time, I felt, to go abroad.

*

Abroad I went, with a vengeance. I followed the traditional route, to begin with. First to Paris; then Geneva; after that, the difficult crossing of the Alps. I spent time in Florence and Pisa; and then went on to Bologna. And eventually I arrived, in the September of 1786, in Venice.

Between 1100 and 1500, Venice was probably the richest and most powerful city in the world. Its power and wealth were derived from trade and from domination of the sea. So important was the maritime connection, in fact, that each year on ascension day, the city marries the sea: symbolically, at least.

By the time I arrived, Venice was well advanced in its long and slow decline. Trade had largely collapsed, and there was trouble with Barbary pirates. But the city was still full of wealth, amusements, and vice. No one had yet heard of Napoleon, who in 1797 would take away the city's independence.

Meanwhile there was in Venice a great flourishing of art, in all its forms, which was unequalled since the Renaissance.

I discovered, in making arrangements for my own grand tour (which was much less grand than some), that there are plenty of people who are ready and willing to provide services for a young gentleman with money. There are, for instance, existing networks of bankers and guides, who will provide, without the slightest effort on the traveller's part, a detailed itinerary, to suit requirements, and who will write, or travel ahead, in order to arrange transport, accommodation, and the painless transfer of funds. Letters of introduction, to persons of social significance, are also available, in order to assist the traveller to meet suitable persons of his own rank. All of this could be done, and was done for me, by my signing a few papers to release the necessary funds.

So it was that, when I arrived in Venice (an arrival which, I may say, I regarded as the whole point of going on the tour in the first place), I was expected, and warmly received, at a hotel which would look after me more than adequately. And it was there, as I mentioned earlier, that I met Monsieur Charleroi. And it was he who introduced me to Madame de Mentou.

Charleroi and I were out walking one day when he espied Madame walking towards us, together with her maid.

'Ah,' he said, 'I must introduce you to a fellow countryman.' Which he did.

We stood and chatted for a while, and I had an opportunity to take a discreet look at Madame; as she, no doubt, did

at me.

Madame was, I would guess, some fifteen years older than I. So she was perhaps forty. She was undeniably a handsome woman. But she took pains, I suspect, not to allow herself to seem striking. She was far from shy (as we shall see), but it was not her way to seek to turn heads.

She was of average height and build. She had a comfortably rounded figure, as was appropriate to a woman of her maturity: but she was neither slim nor fat. Her dress was elegant without being ostentatious. Her hair dark, but not black.

What struck me most about her, as we stood there talking that first afternoon, was her calm demeanour. Nothing seemed to trouble her. And it occurs to me now, fifty years later, that she was La Serenissima in La Serenissima.

After we had finished our brief conversation with Madame, Charleroi and I continued on our way. And I, naturally, questioned him further about the lady.

Charleroi pursed his lips. 'There is something odd about her,' he said. 'She is French, undoubtedly, but when I question her about her connections, all I get is that smile, and evasive answers. She claims to be a widow – but who was Monsieur de Mentou? No one knows.'

Charleroi looked at me and grinned. 'Why are you so interested? Do you fancy your chances?'

I think I may have been slightly offended by this, and I made some typically priggish remark about not impugning the lady's honour. In any event, Charleroi found my com-

ment highly amusing.

'Well,' he said, 'whatever your intentions, I advise you to be careful. In my opinion the lady is not quite what she seems.'

As it happened, I soon had an opportunity to form my own judgement of Madame de Mentou, for shortly afterwards a note arrived, inviting me to dine with her. Which I did. Just the two of us.

I may say that I was powerful flattered by this. Not so long ago I had been a dull provincial schoolmaster, with barely two suits of clothes to his name. And now, here I was, having dinner in Venice with a beautiful Frenchwoman. Not only was I having dinner with her, but she was showing an interest in me: in my aims and ambitions in life.

It was during this first dinner that, wisely or not, and as the result of Madame's questioning, I first conveyed to her the idea that I had some literary ambitions. But we did not discuss that much further on our first evening together. Instead we discussed those parts of Venice which I must be certain to visit and enjoy.

Madame, I gathered, had been resident in the city for some time; though I noticed, as Charleroi had, that when I asked how long she had been here she would not answer directly.

'Oh, long enough to be able to advise a newcomer, Mr Fenman,' was her reply. And it was followed, as ever, by a disarming smile.

This then was the state of affairs up to the moment when

Charleroi told me that there was plague in the city. At which point, you will recall, I immediately rushed round to the house of my new-found friend, and blurted out my concern for her welfare.

Following which, she kissed me on the lips. And after that, dear Reader, I was done for.

*

After Madame had changed out of her half-made dress, into something more suitable, she gave me what we English would call afternoon tea.

She was pleased, she said, that I had called. For she wished to speak to me about my literary ambitions.

Immediately I became nervous. I wished heartily that I had kept my mouth shut.

'You told me,' she said, 'that you have begun to write a novel.'

'Er, yes, Madame.'

'How much have you written so far?'

'Not much, I'm afraid.'

'How much, precisely?' And a smile, as ever, to soften the blow.

'Um, about forty pages.'

'Good. Splendid. Bring them to me tomorrow morning, at nine o'clock sharp.'

And then she changed the subject.

I returned to my hotel. I had, I truly believe, forgotten the

wretched Charleroi; I certainly had no intention of leaving Venice now. But I was worried about what Madame would make of my feeble efforts as a writer. And I was sure that no excuse would release me from the obligation to show her what little fiction I had.

The next morning I returned to her house at nine in the morning, as instructed. I carried with me the notebook in which my forty pages were written – it was one of those used by the boys at the school where I had taught – and I was so depressed by the prospect of having my work dismissed that I had not even dared to re-read my work in progress.

I knocked on the door, and it was opened by Madame's maid: a fair-haired young woman whom I later came to know intimately, but who then struck me as an impudent young miss. She showed me little respect.

'Is this it?' she said, grabbing the notebook from me.

'It is,' I admitted.

'Good.' She smirked at me. 'Come back at eleven, and Madame will tell you what she thinks.'

And with that she closed the door in my face.

It is amazing what the possession of money can do to a man. A year earlier I would have seen myself as no better than this maid (her name, I later discovered, was Lucia); I was simply a schoolmaster, and as much a servant of the wealthy as she. I would have considered myself flattered if she had deigned to speak to me, and could scarcely have hoped to persuade her to take a walk with me. But now, simply because I had inherited money through an accident of

fate, I found myself offended by her cheek!

Fortunately, as I walked around the city for a couple of hours, I had enough common sense to realise what had happened to me, and I determined to be less pompous in future. I returned to the house in a more sensible frame of mind.

*

I will say a word here about the status of the novel in 1786.

The word 'novel' was not much used, as far as I recall, before the turn of the century (although Madame certainly used it, constantly); but by 1786 the idea of a long fictional story, in book form, was certainly well established.

Most of the novels that were then published were, as now, works which had been written with no other purpose but to entertain readers, and thus to earn some income for writer, publisher, and bookseller; and possibly the lending librarians.

It is perfectly true that there were then, as now, some bookish fellows around who took to 'discussing' works of fiction in a serious sort of way – as if potential readers of a story would benefit from having the thing chopped into tiny pieces and examined through a magnifying glass. But I never bothered to read much of that serious literary criticism myself, and I never cared to mix much with those who did.

The books that I read with most enjoyment (as a young man) were not those which have become celebrated as the 'great' or 'important' books of their age. True, I enjoyed the

story of Tom Jones (Mr Fielding); and I enjoyed *Fanny Hill* (when I at last located a copy) even more. But Mr Richardson's story of Pamela I found tedious; and *Tristram Shandy* was deadly: enough to put a man off reading for life.

But these, you will perceive, were the 'discussed' novels: both when they appeared, and subsequently. And my preference was for those stories which were not discussed, but just read, and were passed from hand to hand with a warm encomium.

I had read voraciously among these not very respectable novelists – writers whom the moral guardians of the day for the most part regarded with deep suspicion – and I had come to the conclusion that I could do as well myself. Indeed, I had concluded that I could do much better.

However, like many a would-be writer, I had put off starting my first book. True, I had demonstrated a gift for composition: both at school and university I had written long, and much admired, essays on a variety of subjects. A few had been published: two, I seem to remember, and in minor publications at that. And those two were compared with the scores that I had sent off.

Once I started work as a teacher, I told myself that I would begin to write a book during the school holidays. But holidays came and went, and nothing happened. And then, when I inherited money, I realised that there was no longer anything to prevent me from devoting the best hours of the day to my fictional endeavour.

Except that there was. I had to travel to London, several

times; I had lawyers and bankers to see; papers to sign; arrangements to make.

Finally, with all arrangements for my trip to Europe made, I realised that I had run out of excuses. So I seized an unused notebook, roughed out a plot, and plunged into the writing.

In retrospect, I am rather surprised that I wrote as much as I did. I managed forty pages before I ran out of ideas, inspiration, and (another excuse) time. But when I arrived in Venice, I promised myself, then I would start work in earnest; and by the end of the winter, all would be done. On my return to London, I would be in a position to entrance a publisher with the manuscript of my work of genius.

Except that, three weeks or so into my stay in Venice, I had written nothing more.

Such are the follies of youth. And now my foolishness, incompetence and vainglory were about to be made plain to me; I had no doubt of it. I could not escape Madame's scorn. She had kissed me, and I was obliged to return to her house. She had beguiled and fascinated me, and although I was sickened by the thought of what she would say, I was also in haste for the time to pass when I would see her again.

*

Madame's house was located in a small square, not far from the Rialto bridge. It stood opposite a church, and, when the church clock struck eleven, I knocked once again on the

front door.

Lucia, who must have been standing right behind it, threw open the door, and burst into a fit of giggles.

This time I was not so foolish as before.

'It's all very well for you,' I told her with a grin. 'But I'm the one that's going to get six of the best.'

That little exchange left me better prepared, I think, for what followed.

I joined Madame in her drawing room, and I noted that she had my notebook by her side. But she said nothing whatever about it. Instead, after the usual civilities, and the serving of coffee, she began to question me.

'How long have you had this ambition to be a writer?'

'Years, Madame.' And I explained what I have already related, about postponed attempts and excuses. In the course of that discussion I gave her further information about my family life and personal background. I explained, as best I could, the reasons for having written so little fiction so far.

'Don't worry,' said Madame. 'Such procrastinations are common, even among those who have written several books. Not,' she added sternly, 'that they are to be readily tolerated. Either you are a writer or not. If you are, then write.'

She paused for thought. 'Now tell me – why do you wish to be a novelist, and not, for example, a poet or a playwright?'

I explained that I had no aptitude for writing poetry. Nor, for that matter, much interest in reading it either. As for the theatre, I had little experience of it, though I had enjoyed the

few plays that I had seen.

'But you have, perhaps, some aptitude for prose fiction?'

'Aptitude for prose, certainly.' I spoke of my lengthy letters to friends and relatives, my modest success with essays. 'And I enjoy,' I added, truthfully but perhaps over-earnestly, 'shaping the words on the page.'

Madame was not impressed. 'Hmm. That is all very well, but on its own it will not sustain you through a single novel, much less a career. So let us probe further.'

She rose to her feet and began to pace the room. I was to observe, over the next few months, that Madame always thought and spoke better when she was on her feet.

'Tell me, Mr Fenman, do you wish to be famous? Do you wish to have bystanders nudge each other as you go past, and say to each other, "There goes the famous Mr Fenman?" Do you desire to be invited to meet Duchesses, simply on the strength of your fame?'

'Um, no,' I said. 'Not particularly.' And I was immediately glad that I had answered instinctively and truthfully. It would not be wise, I already recognised, to be anything but frank where Madame was concerned.

'Very well. Do you wish, then, to be praised to the skies in those small but influential literary magazines which are read by frightfully clever young men at Oxford and Cambridge?'

Did I? 'No, not particularly. Can't see the point.'

Madame turned and stared at me. 'Well you can hardly be anxious about the money, for as a result of your inheritance you already have plenty of your own. So what is it then that

you do want?'

For a moment I panicked. She was asking me a question that I had never consciously thought about, and I was groping helplessly for an answer.

After a moment or two's worrying silence, I decided to approach the answer obliquely.

'Well, Madame, let me respond to you this way. I am not interested in fame, as you call it, because I am by nature a retiring sort. I have never yearned to be the centre of attention, and I do not think that I shall develop a taste for it now.

'Neither do I wish to be discussed in print, and to be the subject of discussion among the London-based cliques who read and write for the literary magazines. Such books as those critics recommend are, as often as not, books which I do not enjoy when I come to read them.

'As for money – I admit that once I saw the writing of novels as a possible means of enhancing my very modest income. But that is no longer a concern. Instead, I think I have come to regard the income which may be generated by a novel as a useful measure of success. It seems to me that a willingness to buy a man's novel arises, as often as not, out of having enjoyed that same author's previous book. And, in the sense that I hope my readers will enjoy what I have written, the expenditure of money is perhaps a crude measure of that enjoyment.'

I sat back in my chair, astonished at my own eloquence. For I had never consciously considered all this before. And yet, under Madame's questioning, I suddenly came to under-

stand what I really thought about these things.

Such, in fact, was the lady's method. It was not, perhaps, strictly the Socratic method, but that it was based on classical thinking I have no doubt.

Madame nodded. 'Good. Now, you have mentioned readers, Mr Fenman. What kind of readers do you have in mind?'

'Well, at the risk of sounding silly….'

'Never be afraid of sounding silly.'

'I think, then, that I would like to write novels which will be enjoyed by some of the older boys whom I taught. And some of my fellow undergraduates. The ones who had not been infected by the fever of discussion. The ones who simply buy a book, read it, and then, if it gives them pleasure, pass it on to a friend with a strong recommendation.'

'All perfectly sensible. And what about these boys' sisters and mothers. And, later their wives. Are you interested in writing for them?'

'Certainly. In my experience, the women who are allowed to read novels are enthusiastic readers and are excellent judges. They are more willing than men to admit that they like something which the literary elite hold in disregard, simply because, as they are women, no one expects them to have good taste anyway.'

Madame laughed. 'That's a very painful remark, Mr Fenman, very painful. But largely, I fear, true. I have wrestled with the problem all my days…. So, if I may summarise, your intended readers are the middle class of people. Not the aristocracy, and not the literary elite, but the provincial souls

who are in trade and in the professions – their wives, and sons. The kind of people who sometimes buy books, but more often borrow them, at a fee, from the commercial lending libraries which are increasingly found in the major towns. Is that correct?'

'Very well put, Madame,' I daringly asserted.

And she accepted the compliment gracefully. 'I have had a lot of practice.'

Madame commenced to pace again.

'Have you ever considered, Mr Fenman, what it is that motivates you to wish to write this kind of book for your selected audience? What is it in your past which generates such an ambition?'

She came closer to me.

'You see, in a sense, writing is menial work. It is essentially just day labour. And you are a gentleman of leisure – a man of means. If you wished, you could buy yourself an army commission, or go into the church, with the aim of becoming an archbishop. If all else failed, you could start your own school and become a headmaster. So what is it in your past which drives you to become a writer?'

At that point, as best I recall, I too stood up and began to pace about the room. It was a device, I admit, to give me time to think.

Madame, you see, in the course of just a few minutes, had enthused me beyond words. Already I had the feeling that, with her assistance, I could make enormous progress along a road which was, deep in my heart of hearts, the only one that

I wished to follow. So I paced about and sought for an answer to her question.

It would be quite wrong of me to suggest that the answer emerged that first morning. Indeed, already I have condensed and simplified many detailed discussions into one tidy exchange of views which clarified what I hoped to do and how I hoped to do it.

However, to avoid tedium (if, in fact, I have not driven you away already), let me summarise here what Madame helped me to discover over a period of weeks and months.

We concluded, eventually, that my ambition to write arose out of a fear that I was socially, financially, and perhaps intellectually inferior to those with whom I mixed when at school and university.

At school, some of my fellow pupils came from families which had as modest an income as my own poor mother. But many were the sons of wealthy farmers, landowners, and professional men: and they were not slow to make that point.

At Cambridge, I was not quite as poverty-stricken as Dr Johnson had been, at that other place, but I was seriously short of funds none the less; and I felt bitter emotion towards those who revealed their view of me as an inferior. Some of those men wore more coats in a week than I had owned in a lifetime.

Untangling this personal history was a slow process, and involved no little effort. But that, in the end, was what Madame and I concluded. We decided that I needed to prove

myself to be the equal of anyone.

'It is best,' declared Madame, 'to be clear about the source of your ambition. For you must understand this: as long as you live, the pain associated with those youthful experiences will ever be with you. Every slight, real or imagined, is engraved on your soul. In that part of your mind which stores these hurts, the feelings will remains as fresh and painful as if they had happened yesterday. And no matter how many books you write, and how many readers you acquire, such feelings will go on demanding to be assuaged.'

Perhaps I looked slightly glum at that point, for Madame comforted me.

'You should not regard this as a handicap in life. On the contrary, it is a great asset. For it will sustain you throughout a long career as a writer. Without such ambition, you would remain for ever a wishful thinker, and a dreamer about what might have been.'

In the course of the past fifty years, I have found all that to be true.

*

Possibly the next day, and certainly in that first week, Madame asked me what I considered to be the point of the novel.

I was baffled. 'The point?'

She was patient. 'The purpose of it. The novel is a relatively new form of art. So what does it do?'

'Well…' I groped, as so often with Madame, for a sensible answer. 'It tells a story,' I managed at last.

'And why should anyone listen to that story?'

Another pause. 'To know the end?'

'Why should anyone care about the end?'

'Because… because the characters are interesting?'

'In what way?'

And so on. Quite often, Madame's questioning would make me feel a fool, but she always softened the effect with a smile or a joke.

'What are you reading now?' she asked me one day.

I named some adventure story, long since forgotten.

'Very well. Tell me about the last book that you read of that type. What happened at the end?'

'Well… I was rather sorry that it ended.'

'Why?'

'Because I enjoyed it.'

'And what does the phrase "to enjoy" mean?'

'Um… It means to feel pleasure.'

'And what is pleasure?'

'It's a… feeling.'

'Stronger than that, surely.'

'Very well. An emotion.'

'So, you valued that novel because…?'

'Because it made me feel an emotion.'

'Ah! At last! We make some progress, Mr Fenman.'

Encouraged, I continued. 'Actually that particular book made me feel a number of emotions. Pity, anger at the injus-

tice inflicted upon the hero. Concern. Disgust with the behaviour of certain individuals. Humour, occasionally. Bits of it made me laugh.'

Madame smiled. 'My friend,' she declared, 'I perceive that we may make a novelist of you yet.'

Oh, how my heart gave a little lurch when she said that! And a glow of contentment spread within me, leading me to relax back into my chair. Perhaps I was not a complete fool after all.

'Your circumstance is this,' said Madame. 'You are rather like a singer who can at least sing in tune. We have a long way to go before you perform in places likes the San Benedetto, but at least you have some of the basic skills.'

We did days more work – nay, weeks more – on emotion. We talked about it constantly. We made lists of all the emotions we could think of. Or rather, that I could think of, for Madame made me do the work, as was only right. For I would learn nothing by just listening to her, like some sleepy boy at the back of the class.

Together we read books and discussed, page by page, the emotions (or lack of them) that the text aroused. We considered, in detail, how it was that the writer had achieved these effects (or why he failed); and we learnt to distinguish between those effects which were intended, and those which, occasionally, the author had created inadvertently.

Few teachers, I would venture to suggest, were more skilled in bringing out the best in a student than was Madame.

*

I pause here for several reasons.

As a practising writer I was ever alert to the risk of tedium, the reader's response to which is to begin to skip through the pages rather than read them carefully. So I must not bore you.

True, this is a historical record of actual events, and, if my mind remains clear, it will be an accurate one. I am therefore obliged to tell you what passed between Madame and myself, in terms of our discussions about the art of fiction. But this short work is not an instruction manual for would-be writers, and it is therefore unnecessary for me to do more than outline some of the key lessons that Madame taught me.

Another reason for a slight change of direction at this point is that there was more to my relationship with Madame than simply discussions of the arts. In short, Madame and I became lovers.

My intention is to leave this account of my first stay in Venice with those who will handle my estate after my death; I hope that my executors may see fit to publish it in some form or other. And for the sake of completeness I will now enlarge upon the statement that I have just made – namely, that Madame and I became lovers. But I do so in the full knowledge that, in the 1830s at least, no printer in England will ever set this next passage in type. Though he will, no

doubt, read what I have to say with close attention.

At some point – and I cannot now be definite when, but it was within a week or two of the events described above – Madame took it into her head to make me, as she put it, a little less English.

I arrived at her house one afternoon, by appointment, on a day when the weather was still warm, and I was admitted by one of her manservants. Like all Madame's servants, this man impressed me with his total devotion to her. And they all spoke English, I noted.

I went upstairs to the drawing room, knocked politely on the half-open door, and was invited to enter.

Madame was seated in a comfortable chair, over by the window. She was barely dressed, in a gown of silk which was open all the way down, and hung at her sides.

Kneeling at Madame's feet was her maid, Lucia, who looked up at me and grinned as I entered.

Lucia had a pair of scissors in her hand, and she was engaged, believe it or not, in trimming the black triangle of hair at Madame's groin.

'Come in, Thomas,' called Madame. And it was, I believe, the first time that she had used my first name. 'Do not hover over by the door, like some embarrassed English schoolboy.'

Well! Dammit! That was a challenge and no mistake. So, taking the opportunity offered, I walked over to the two women by the window.

'You will excuse me,' said Madame, 'if I allow Lucia to continue her work. But I find that every patch of hair on the

human body needs attention from time to time.'

'Well yes,' I said, in bemused tones. 'I dare say it does. Though I have never felt the need to allow a barber access to that particular area of my own body.'

At this they both laughed, and I relaxed. Or tried to.

The fact was, of course, that I was twenty-five years old, and had always enjoyed (as I do to this very day) remarkable good health. So, at the sight of Madame naked, or as near as makes no difference, my heart was pounding so hard that I was even slightly dizzy. Furthermore, there were developments in my own groin which threatened to cause me further embarrassment.

But then I thought: well, dammit, in for a penny, in for a pound. So I reached down and adjusted my clothing so that my manhood stood upright, which was far more comfortable.

At this, Lucia made some comment in a language which I did not understand. Madame chuckled and replied in the same tongue.

In other circumstances I might have well taken offence at being discussed in secret terms, but as it was I just gave Lucia an enquiring look, as if to say, 'And what do you have to say about the matter, Miss Lucia?'

I dare say that there is little risk of boredom setting in among readers at this point, but I will not go on too long. Suffice it to say – and I am astonished now, when I look back on it – that after a short exchange of pleasantries, Madame suggested to me, in the most polite way imaginable, that I

should take off my own clothes.

If you had told me, when I set off from England in 1785, that I would, in the following year, be asked by a mature member of the French nobility to remove all my clothing, in a house in Venice, in full daylight, at about four in the afternoon, so that the lady might inspect my physique – well then, I would not have believed you. But that is what happened. And, with some considerable trepidation, I did what was asked.

It took a little courage. No, courage is not the right word. It called for a conscious effort of will. However, I was, as I said, a fit and healthy young man, and I was aware, from my schooldays on, that physically I had nothing to be ashamed of. So I took off all my clothes, every last stitch, and stood there, hands on hips, daring those two women to do their worst.

Their worst, it turned out, was to discuss me in some detail, but in that strange foreign tongue, the nature of which I could not even guess at. Years later, when I saw a young woman with similar colouring to Lucia's, and heard her speak in a similar manner, I made enquiries and discovered that the girl was Swedish. But perhaps we need not place too much reliance on that.

In any event, after an earnest discussion, and some careful assessment by Lucia, it was evidently decided that I would do for the part, so to speak. So, with a word of thanks, Madame dismissed Lucia. Then she took me by the hand and led me to her bedroom, where we undertook together

those things which men and woman have done since time began. Or at least some of them.

On that first occasion, I was not, I believe, entirely up to the standards that Madame expected of those who were invited into her bed, and so I was instructed to attend at the house every afternoon for the next week, at 2 p.m. sharp, so that Lucia might give me a course of instruction.

This I did. And this Lucia did. Rather well.

It seems to me, in retrospect, that, given that she had corporeal form, Madame required physical intimacy in the same way that she required food. And, just as one trains up a good cook to do things the way one wishes, so Madame had me instructed in what might please her.

Despite Lucia's early tendency to giggle in my presence, she took her duties as instructress seriously. As did I, her pupil.

I suppose I should say, in my own defence, so to speak, that I was not a complete novice. At home in Northamptonshire, I had found the country girls tolerably co-operative, provided one observed the practices of Onan. At Cambridge the young women were far more interested in richer men than I; but I had the occasional success.

Lucia and I began, I recall, with a session on the art of kissing, but we soon moved on to more advanced matters. In the course of those five (or perhaps seven) afternoons, Lucia introduced me to a number of bedroom procedures which, if they had ever been practised in England, had hitherto escaped my notice. Some were not entirely to my taste, but

that, I suppose, was the purpose of my short course of study: to find out what I liked to do and what I could do convincingly.

One curious aspect of the situation I remember particularly well. Quite early in our mutual efforts, I expressed a concern that if I did what Lucia instructed, she might soon be left with child. But Lucia dismissed the idea.

'You must always remember, Mr Fenman,' she told me, 'that while I am in this city I am under Madame's protection. No harm will come to me here.'

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Even while I was completing my bedroom studies, Madame continued my separate course of instruction in how to write a novel.

Madame took the view that, in writing a successful work of fiction, planning is the key. She compared it with making a journey.

'Consider, Mr Fenman, what you undertook before you began your grand tour. You collected information, both consciously and unconsciously, for several years. You made specific enquiries about the best way to do this and to do that. You made decisions about which cities you wished to visit, and in what order. True, you left room and time for side trips along the way. You arranged for the possibility of a change of plans, if circumstances changed and new information came your way while you were on route. But you always

knew where you were going, and in what order. And you always knew where you would end up.'

All of which I understood well enough.

At a certain point, said Madame, after one has allowed a literary project to simmer for a while, it is necessary to refine the subject matter of a book into one sentence – a sentence which answers the question, 'What is this book about?'

'And what,' she demanded to know, 'is your book about?'

This called for a good deal of head-scratching and sighing and pacing about on my part. But eventually I came up with this: 'It's about a young man whose beloved is kidnapped in an attempt to prevent her from claiming her inheritance.'

Oh yes, I hear your snort of derision, dear Reader. It was a weary old plot even in 1786, and I knew it. But Madame was not too dismayed.

'Scarcely original,' she commented. 'But it's all in the telling, Mr Fenman, it's all in the telling.'

At some point, Madame took me out shopping and insisted on buying me a large supply of superb Venetian stationery. Loose sheets were, she said, required for planning a book. One could use one sheet to summarise each chapter or scene, and the sheets could then be spread all over the floor and re-ordered if necessary. But for the actual writing of the text, a large notebook (with a splendid marbled cover) was needed. The first draft would go on the right-hand page only, using alternate lines. When revising the draft, changes could be written in the lines left spare, or on the opposite page. This is a system which I used ever after, and it was Ma-

dame's gift to me.

Madame declared that 100,000 words were quite sufficient for a novel. If one had not captured the reader's heart by then, she said, nothing further would be gained by continuing for another 50,000 words. Such effort would be better expended on the next book.

Within these 100,000 words, there would be 50 chapters of 2,000 words each. This chapter length was adequate to describe in detail the events of a particular set of affairs, but not so long that the reader could not finish it before retiring to bed, or doing whatever came next in the reader's busy life.

Madame further decreed that I must equip myself with a hero, a heroine, and at least one person who was their enemy for some reason. There must also be, somewhere along the way, a love story involving a sympathetic young couple who would have to be united in matrimony before the novel came to a conclusion.

All of these characters, Madame declared, must be recognisable human beings, with adequate reasons for behaving as they did – and this was particularly true of the hero's enemy. If this gentleman is to behave badly, she believed, he must have adequate cause for behaving badly. He must feel, perhaps, that he himself has been the victim of injustice.

Now I dare say, dear Reader, that you are sitting there open-mouthed with astonishment. You will be astonished at the banality of the advice that was offered, and astonished that one such as I could be so feeble-minded as to require someone to lay down the law to him in such an obvious way.

I plead guilty to all that: or at least, I accept that there was ignorance, foolishness, and lack of talent on my part. But I am, of course greatly simplifying and condensing the tuition which Madame offered. Furthermore, you must remember that this was all fifty years ago, since which time tens of thousands of new novels have rendered stale and lifeless so many of our earlier books. At the time, all this was fresh thinking – at least to me.

Together, Madame and I worked on the outline of my book for a solid month. I started with my original idea, and borrowed willingly Madame's suggested framework. I had a beginning and an end, and I spent much time inventing adventures and hazards to fill in the space between. Fortunately this latter proved to be relatively easy for me, though I understand that other writers struggle with it; hence their interminable spinning out of scenes which should, in my view, progress much faster, and carry the reader along at a great rate of knots.

Madame's view was that a plot must demonstrate a causal relationship between events. In other words, things do not just happen, one after the other, as a result of fate, or chance, or happenstance. They must happen because one event causes, and leads to, another.

Keep the plot simple, she urged me, over and over again. Yes, there must be complications and difficulties, but the plot must run like a backbone throughout the whole length of the book.

Above all, Madame hated the epistolary form, as did I, so

it was no great difficulty to avoid that. Instead, Madame advised me to determine who would be the principal character in each chapter – this was normally the one with the most to lose, the character in greatest peril – and to tell the story from the point of view of that individual, though in the third person.

Once we had completed the planning of the novel I began to write. It was agreed that I would draft one chapter a day, five days a week. I worked in the mornings, rising early, which suited me. Then I would take my draft to Madame in the afternoon. She would read it, and annotate it like a schoolmaster marking an essay. And we would meet in the evening, before dinner, to discuss her strictures.

After dinner, Madame and I would go out on the town, to the theatre, or a concert, or some musical performance. By my count, there were fourteen theatres in Venice, featuring operas, ballets and plays; so we had plenty to choose from, and Madame was indefatigable: an evening without attending a performance of some kind was in her view an evening wasted.

*

When I accompanied Madame de Mentou on our many evenings out together, I was often struck by the fact that she was known everywhere and was everywhere greeted as a friend.

We often walked the streets in darkness, and I was con-

stantly concerned about the danger of attack by thieves. But she herself seemed immune to such fears.

She never passed a beggar without handing over a coin. But she did it without show, and without a pause in whatever she was saying. At night, especially, the beggars had a sinister appearance.; but they were never a problem. One at a time, spaced at intervals, they would shuffle forward out of the shadows. Madame would smoothly transfer alms, usually with a flash of gold; and with a whispered blessing the afflicted one would fade back into the darkness..

Once I came to know Madame better myself, I asked her (see how much of my Englishness I had lost!) quite personal questions about her background; but she was never at all forthcoming.

Take the matter of her widowhood. It was Charleroi, I believe, who had told me that she was a widow. But she never spoke of her late husband, and I came to believe that he was a convenient fiction.

The use of the prefix 'de', she told me, had been granted to one of her ancestors by the French king, in return for services rendered, and she winked as she told me that. But she did not specify what the services might have been, much less when or where they might have been offered.

When I was bold enough to ask her about her Christian name, Madame was also evasive. She told me that she had had many names in many places. 'I take a name that suits my purposes,' she said bluntly. 'And it is sufficient for you to call me Madame.'

All of this led me to believe that perhaps Monsieur Charleroi had been right, and the lady was an adventuress of some sort. But she was clearly not an adventuress who was after my money, for she never made the slightest demand upon me. On the contrary, she insisted repeatedly on paying for our entertainment herself.

'I look upon it,' she said, 'as an investment. And my reward will come in the form of your lifetime's work.' As a gentleman I was not comfortable with this, but I was forced to accept it.

I soon learnt that I was not the only young person in Venice that winter who had, so to speak, been taken under Madame's wing. There was a tenor, about my own age, from one of the theatre companies; and there was a young lady violinist. I saw something of both of these from time to time.

Madame also referred to various artists whom she visited in their studios; but these I never met.

On at least one occasion, I called at Madame's house and was allowed to witness the end of a music lesson with the tenor. Madame accompanied him on some kind of keyboard instrument (I have no great taste in music, so I lack detail for you). And when she paused to give the tenor instruction, she sang too, to demonstrate a point. She had a fine, strong voice, beautifully pure, but when I complimented her on it she gave a wave of the hand and told me not to be silly.

'I was given a good grounding in all the arts,' she said, 'by various masters of each of them. And I know how to teach. But I do not perform. That is not my gift.'

More than once, Madame demonstrated a slightly wry sense of humour. We attended a concert together, and heard Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. At the end, I remarked that, even to my ear, it seemed a remarkably fine piece.

'It should be,' said Madame with feeling. 'We spent enough time on it.' And I did not think that she was talking about the organist. She added, for good measure, 'It's all to do with numerology, you know. Bach was fascinated by that.' At the time, I did not know what she was talking about. Neither do I now.

In conversation, I could scarcely mention a writer without discovering that she was familiar with his work. Come to that, I seldom named a city without hearing that she had been there. At first I thought she was boasting, in many of these discussions; but she spoke with such obvious knowledge and affection that I soon realised I was wrong.

Specifically, in connection with my own art, I once asked her how she came to know so much about writing novels.

'It's simple,' she said. 'I read, and I feel, and I think. At the moment, Thomas, you simply read and feel. But you must learn to think, too.'

*

I venture here into the unprintable again.

I was not so much in love with Madame as fascinated and enthralled by her. Fortunately, however, I was never naïve

enough to imagine that I was the only man in Madame's life. Nor was I. Like me, the tenor had also taken Lucia's instruction course, and he was subsequently allowed intimate privileges; as, I believe, was the lady violinist.

On a few occasions the tenor and I were entertained together; and, at least once, the violinist and Madame and I spent an agreeable half hour in her bedroom.

Lucia joined in these celebrations as and when the mood took her. Her preference, it turned out, was to be worked on by Madame and the violinist simultaneously, at the end of which her body trembled in a most extraordinary manner. She became quite voluble at such moments of passion, but once again I never understood a word.

Venice, in those days, was famous for its carnival, which took place in the period prior to Lent, and the most famous aspect of the carnival was the use of masks. This attracted, it is true, some undesirable elements to Venice, and it was said that half the malefactors in Europe fled there for safety.

Whatever the truth of that, the carnival of early 1787 was a memorable one for me. Madame typically dressed as a nun who had escaped from confinement, a role to which she lent considerable verisimilitude, and she often cast me as a commedia dell'arte figure, Dr Graziano, all in black.

Participants in carnival were expected to take full advantage of the anonymity of the mask, and one witnessed many frenzied couplings in some odd spots. I myself was too concerned about the risk of disease to abandon myself completely to these activities; instead I took pride, whenever I

could, in using my new-found skills to give pleasure to Madame.

And, lest you think that this reference to peripheral matters has been entirely irrelevant, let me say that Madame did not see it so. She thought that the performance of physical acts between men and women was relevant to the process of writing.

'As with the penis, so with the pen,' she told me. 'The purpose of both acts is to provide mutual satisfaction. On the one hand, the man and the woman; and, on the other hand, the writer and the reader. The man, or the writer, must dominate in the relationship, but he must not bully or abuse. And he must bring to each of these exercises a measure of controlled abandon.'

It was not Madame's view, I must emphasise, that in order to write well one must be an orgiast. Or even be a participant in affairs of the heart. It was simply that she saw certain parallels between the two activities, and drew them to my attention.

All of which reminds me that I should now return to describing how Madame's tuition of me proceeded.

*

After I had revised a chapter of my novel, and after Madame had reviewed it, I would take account of her notes and refine the text further. I would then take the manuscript to our printer.

Madame had told me, from early in our working relationship, that a prose manuscript looks quite different when it is in book form. She was right. Since I had ample means at my disposal, we therefore selected together a printer who would set my book in type, even though I had no intention of publishing the work in Venice.

This printed proof was then revised again, if necessary, and finally was added to the pile of completed work.

I worked hard, all through that autumn and winter. As the days shortened, and the cold winds came, this was not a difficult regime to keep to. In such an atmosphere, and with such a mistress as I had, who could fail to apply himself?

Over the course of several months, Madame gave me perhaps a thousand pieces of advice. I quickly got into the habit of writing these down, as soon as I had a moment to do so. This was a practice of which Madame approved.

'I don't want to have to tell you things twice, Thomas,' she once said. 'Human beings are so slow to learn. They keep having to be taught the same things. It's very irritating.'

I have that notebook still, and in the years to come I was to re-read it every time I started to plan a novel.

The unity of mood, Madame said, is perhaps the hardest thing for an inexperienced writer to find. It calls for a consistent voice. And when I found this difficult myself, Madame urged me not to be downcast.

'It will take you ten books or a million words to become a master of the skills, Mr Fenman. Five years, perhaps, in your case.'

As ever, she was right.

On the question of style, Madame recommended short sentences, with simple, solid words and clear statements. She discouraged flowery descriptions.

'Leave the decoration to others,' she advised. 'We have enough of it already, in art and architecture. Concentrate instead on setting an internal rhythm. Originally,' she reminded me, 'all works were in verse, so that they could be remembered more easily. Now that we have books, and printing presses, there is no need for memory. But works of fiction still need a rhythm of their own. They need balance and poise. And that is what you must learn to provide.'

Throwaway remarks, which Madame in all probability forgot ten minutes after they were made, were treasured by me as if they had been written on tablets of stone. Here, for example, are two: Avoid lengthy descriptions of scenery; people know what a mountain looks like. Eschew coincidence, except at the very start of a story.

I knew by now that Madame would not be available to me for much longer, and that is why I wrote down every one of her observations, however trivial the comment might have seemed at the time. And when I re-read them now, they seem to me to be always fresh, and always sound.

*

Eventually, my novel was completed. In every respect. I had written it, Madame had criticised my draft, I had revised it,

had it set in type, Madame had read it again, I had made final alterations…. And now, all was done.

'When it is done,' said Madame, 'stop fiddling with it. Leave it alone. Move on to the next one.'

So I did.

I got the printer to bind me up a few copies of my book, simply as a convenient way to transport the text. I had a number sent back to England, by two different routes, and I kept a couple for myself.

At that point, I asked Madame for a frank assessment of my first effort. I knew well enough that she would not flatter me.

'You have done tolerably well,' she told me. 'Your novel is not bad, Mr Fenman, for a beginner. But the real test will be the second book. I shall not be there to hold your hand for that one.'

And in fact, suddenly, she was not there at all.

I called at Madame's house early one afternoon, expecting to confirm arrangements for an evening visit to the theatre, only to find that she had left Venice.

I stood there, open-mouthed, while her manservant repeated to me that Madame had gone.

'Gone?' I said. 'Gone where?'

He shrugged. 'I do not know, sir.'

No one knew where she had gone, or by what means, or with whom. It was clear only that she had left Venice for good; and that she had left behind a house full of 'possessions' – possessions which, clearly, meant nothing to her.

After a day or two, I ceased to ask for any further information, because it was obviously pointless.

In the course of my enquiries, I met the tenor and the violinist, who were equally puzzled, and equally bereft. We all three had a smattering of French, in which we could converse haltingly, so we had lunch together. We exchanged details of our own places of permanent residence, and agreed to keep in touch. But I'm afraid we never did.

In subsequent years, I thought about Madame often. Whenever I met someone who was going to Paris, I always asked them to enquire about a Madame de Mentou. But no one returned with news.

For twenty years or more, I occasionally sent off letters to people in France or Venice, asking for news of Madame. There was never any response. But then, eventually, I came to realise that so much time had elapsed that Madame had probably died. Or become too old to travel. So I stopped.

But I could never, of course, forget her. For she often returned to me in my dreams. Whenever I was writing a novel, and was faced with some troublesome problem of plotting or character, she would speak to me in my sleep and suggest a solution. Or, more often, she would chide me for my own stupidity and tell me to work things out for myself.

'Do not be so silly,' Thomas, she would say. 'Think.'

And whenever Madame appeared to me in my dreams, she had not, of course, aged one minute. She remained as she had ever been: beautiful, and serene.

*

In the early summer of 1787, when the weather improved, I travelled home to England.

I paused in London for some weeks, before going back to Northamptonshire, and took steps to acquaint myself with the affairs of publishers.

Once again, I found that the mere possession of money allowed one to acquire information which otherwise would not have been forthcoming. And in due course I met a publisher who was relatively young, but who seemed to be the kind of man I wanted to handle my own book.

I asked him to read my novel, with a view to publishing it, and then I went to see him. He said that the book had certain merits, and in principle he would like to publish it. But, he said, the market was difficult at present, and he doubted that he could offer me terms which would appeal.

For my part, I had learnt from other sources that he would welcome an injection of capital, so I suggested terms to him, which he accepted on the spot.

Thus was my first novel published, to no great acclaim, but it made a profit and my publisher and I worked together for many years. His grandson now runs the business.

After ten books or so, as Madame had predicted, I developed a greater sense of assurance about what I was doing, and a degree of fluency in the execution of such works. Over the next fifty years I wrote an average of two books a year.

Last year, when I had completed a hundred books, I

stopped. There was nothing magic about the figure of one hundred, but enough, I decided, was enough.

During this long career I never became respectable. I was never one of the 'discussed' novelists. But this troubled me not at all. If I was discussed, it was always in relation to my deplorable popularity (which surely indicated, it was said, a catastrophic decline in taste), and my doubly deplorable prolificacy. How, the critics wondered, could such a vulgar fellow be so popular? And what did it say about the temper of the age? Nothing good, it was thought.

I took a perverse delight, I fear, in my monstrous reputation. I offered no prefaces relating my work to the Greeks, the Romans, or the Arabs. I did not, on my title pages, claim to be cultivating the principles of virtue and religion in the young. I never gave a damn about the moral welfare of the young. I was, in fact, quite happy to encourage the idle habit of reading fiction for fun; and if I inculcated any religion, it was pagan in nature.

That having been said, my heart was always in the right place. In my books, good always triumphs over evil, and tragedies occur only along the way, not at the end of the road. At the end, all is sweetness, light, and optimism. That is my temperament, and in any case that is what satisfies the vast majority of readers, and thus sells the most books.

For the most part, I wrote books set in present, or in the recent past, but with occasional ventures into mediaeval times. My stock in trade was made up of what are now familiar materials: ghosts, secret children of royal personages,

oriental travels, women who pose and dress as men, rape, murder, arson, legacies, theft, embezzlement, injustice, children born out of wedlock, secret tunnels, locked rooms, battles, cock fights, dog fights, lots of gambling, fortunes placed on the turn of a card, duels, nuns who fall in love with other nuns and escape together, comedic episodes (learnt from Shakespeare), masquerades, stabbings, heroines kidnapped in nightgowns, love trysts in the woods, evil uncles, pirates, highwaymen, hangings, beheadings, talking skulls, abandoned babies, shipwrecks, carriage accidents, false friends, abusive employers, blackmail, the Inquisition, comic servants, scenes where the heroine's dress is caught on a nail and pulled off, trunks found in attics, auctions, madhouses, and twins separated at birth – to mention but a few of my favourite devices.

What fun it all was. For me and for my readers.

I was particularly fond of writing about strong, unconventional women: I invented many versions of Madame. This, not surprisingly, brought me women readers. Young women read my work precisely because they thought their mothers would disapprove of it. Though Mama herself would buy it and read it if convinced that she could keep her purchase from her husband. Meanwhile, her husband read my books secretly, in his study or at his club.

If I have to summarise my career, I say this: While making my way through Italy, I stayed, inevitably, in Florence. And one does not have to be in Florence long to realise that the city was (and is) a manufactory of art. Some cities make

gloves, or hats, or shoes, or lace: Florence makes paintings and sculpture.

Over the centuries, whenever a church in Italy needed a painting of the annunciation, for example, it would send to Florence and commission one. Smaller churches, in poor and remote villages, could afford only a relatively unskilled artist; those in the rich cities could meet the fee of a great master. But all the artists, whatever their status, were in the same business: they produced paintings to order, to satisfy the market.

Which is precisely what I did with books. I recognise, full well, that I was always in the middle rank of practitioners. I am certainly not immortal. But few are.

*

About the middle of last year, I was approached for advice by a young man who hoped to build his own career as a novelist. Naturally, I gave him such help as I could. I told him, as I had told a few others, that I had been given enormous help myself, when a young man, and I gladly returned the favour now.

More than once, I mentioned to this young man my experience in Venice. I described it at some length. And I must have spoken with great warmth and affection, for at the end he said to me gently, 'Perhaps, Mr Fenman, you should go back to Venice for one last visit. From what you have said, it is clear to me that you would enjoy it very much. Somewhere

in the city of Venice, the ghost of Madame awaits you.'

That is what he said to me. His exact words: Somewhere in the city of Venice, the ghost of Madame awaits you.

And so, as I said at the beginning, after making due preparation, that is what I have done. This year, 1836, I have returned to Venice. And here I sit now, writing these words.

Venice is much changed. And yet, of course, it is exactly the same. It is a city slowly dying. But what better place is there to be, at the end of one's own long life?

I am staying at the Hotel Danieli, so called because in 1822 Giuseppe Dal Niel transformed an old palace and gave it his name. And I must tell you now what has befallen me, and what has caused me to take up my pen for what is, I believe, the last of my work intended for publication; albeit, in this case, after I am gone.

I arrived in Venice on a Tuesday. After a day spent quietly, to recover from my travels, I went out the next morning to take coffee in the Piazza San Marco. There are, I am told, twenty-seven coffee shops in that area, but I chose the one which carries the name Florian. It was opened in 1720, and in 1786 I used it often.

On Thursday morning last I sat down, at a table in the open air, and a waiter brought me coffee, which I drank. This is what happened to me thereafter:

I open my eyes with a start. Even though it is mid morning, I realise that I may have nodded off. But now I am wide awake. There is a certain stillness, and silence in the air. I

am aware, or feel that I am, that something important is about to happen.

I look around me, and espy the same young waiter, hovering. I call to him for more coffee. And then I say, 'Bring another cup!'

He goes. And returns quickly, as if he had anticipated my need.

Silence. A flock of pigeons, on the far side of the Piazza, takes off and leaves. There are no other birds. There is no wind. There is no one in sight.

I look around again.

And then, on the far side of the square, I see a movement. I see a woman approaching.

At first she is some way off. And although my eyes are good at a distance, I cannot at first make out her features. But I concentrate upon her, as she is walking straight towards me.

And then, I begin to suspect. But no. That cannot be so. I look again, harder, and see no reason to declare myself wrong. But I see good reason to doubt my senses, so I stand up, the better to perceive.

As the woman approaches, I see that she is a mature lady. Neither tall nor short. Neither fat nor thin. Elegant but not over-concerned about her appearance. And she is smiling at me as if we are old friends.

My eyes begin to blur with tears and I stagger forward to meet her, knocking over my chair. And she, when she comes within few yards of me, holds out her arms to greet me and

embrace.

'Madame!' I cry. The words emerge in a choking sob, and as she puts her arms around me I clutch her closely to me, unable to say more, and I wet her lovely face with tears, as I say, over and over again. 'Madame! Madame! How wonderful to see you again! After all these years.' And so forth.

With the waiter's help, order is restored.

I remain with my arms wrapped around Madame for far longer than is seemly, and when at last I recognise the extent of my error I apologise in full.

And Madame smiles. Her lovely warm smile, which was always used to soften the most brutal criticism, even though it was always richly deserved.

'There is no need to apologise, Mr Fenman. No one cares. See – look around you? No one has paused in their business. We are just two old friends who have met again after a long time, and are delighted to find each other well.'

I can still barely speak, but I manage to stutter that I can scarcely believe what I see. So she begs me to sit down, and take coffee, and all will be well.

I slump into my chair, and wipe my eyes with a new Venetian handkerchief, bought the previous day. As if I knew I might need it.

Madame pours me coffee. And while she does, I look at her closely.

She is unchanged. I swear this to you, by all that you and I hold holy. She is unchanged. Not a day has gone by since I saw her last – not for her. I, I am old and somewhat bent.

Stiff of gait, grey and sparse of hair. Fit and well, it is true, but aged. While Madame is just the same.

I sit and wonder at this, and Madame smiles at me again.

'I remember you,' I say, 'from my dreams. For whenever I have a problem, I seek your advice. And you come to me in the darkness, and tell me not to be silly. You tell me I must think.'

'So you must,' says Madame kindly. 'So you must.'

But for the moment I prefer not to think too hard. For I fear that, if I do, Madame will disappear.

'Madame de Mentou,' I say at last – when I have gathered what little remains of my wits. 'I never thought to meet you again.... How did you know where I was?'

'Ah,' says Madame. 'I listened to the pigeons' coo, and they told me you were coming. And then I talked to them again, and they told me where to find you.'

'But you are just the same,' I say softly. 'Unchanged. Just the same Madame de Mentou, as of old.'

She shakes her head gently. 'No, not quite the same, Mr Fenman. Not quite the same. I am not now Madame de Mentou. If I ever was.'

'No longer Madame?'

'No. We are indeed old friends, and I am delighted to see you again. But allow me to give you my card.'

From a bag at her waist she takes out a white card, with black Venetian print upon it, and hands it me.

Mrs Mentorn, it says. With an address in San Marco; near the Rialto bridge. An address which is very familiar to me.

I look up at her. 'No longer Madame, then?'

She looks at me kindly and shakes her head. 'No longer Madame.'

I am lost for a moment. Unable to decide what to say or do. But then I understand.

'But perhaps,' I say, 'perhaps, as a favour to a very old man, you might allow me to call you Madame? For old times' sake?'

'Of course you may. Of course. It will be a small courtesy from me to you. It will be our little secret.'

And then she winks at me and smiles. And picks up her cup of coffee.

I put my head in my hands, and sob once again like a child.

We spoke further that morning, Madame and I. And we walked together through the squares of Venice and along the sides of the canals. I escorted Madame home, to the house which I knew so well. But I did not go in.

Madame explained to me that she had a number of commitments over the coming days and weeks. This was her gentle way, of course, of telling me that I must not expect to monopolise her company; which fortunately I had the good sense to know already. She had, she said, a circle of friends whom she was endeavouring to help. There was a playwright, for example; and a tenor, of course. How could there not be a tenor in Venice?

I smiled and said that I quite understood.

‘But we shall see each other from time to time,’ said Madame. ‘We shall go about the town together. We shall go to parties, to concerts and the theatre. We shall be seen to be a couple. And I shall be flattered to be in your company.’

‘Oh no, Madame!’ I laughed. ‘The flattery will be all mine, I assure you.’

And thus we parted, good friends, as ever.

*

I returned to my hotel, where I took lunch and thought about the events of the day. I had a great deal to think about.

To begin with, I wondered why I had come back to Venice, at all, after so many years; and eventually enlightenment dawned. I have returned to Venice because I have come home.

As I explained in the beginning, my name reveals my origins: Fenman. My ancestors lived in the fens. They were watermen. They lived on low islands and reed beds, for ever in danger from the next tide, the next storm, the next flood. In the fens, of course, no great city arose in the swamps and the meres as it has here, on the Adriatic. Yes, the cathedral at Ely stands proud against the sky, but little else. It is only here, in Venice, that we find both watermen and culture and a city of magic and light.

It is here, as a young man, that I truly came alive, and so Venice is my spiritual home. It is odd that it has taken me so long to understand that fact. I was not quite born in the fens,

and I shall not quite die in them. But this is as good a place to die as any – better than any other that I can think of – and I am content with it.

When I had clarified my own mind about why I had come to Venice, I decided that I would write a brief account of my experiences here; and it is that which now engages your attention (if indeed it still does).

In writing this brief memoir, I hoped that I would be able to answer the question which…

No, I must not say that the question troubles me, for it troubles me not at all. In a sense I do not care who Madame de Mentou is, whether she is the same person as Mrs Mentorn, and how it is that she has returned to Venice at the same time as myself. Neither do I really care to know, or even to speculate, how it is that she remains untouched by time, whereas I am not. But this question may trouble you, dear Reader. Have you come all this way with me, you wonder, only to find that you have been on a fool's errand?

I feel I must rehearse what I said at the beginning. The possibilities are these: that I am absolutely truthful in all that I say; that I am a complete liar; and that I am no longer master of my own processes of thought. Those, as I see them, are the options.

And I must leave it, I fear, to your judgement to decide which of these holds good. Who knows – perhaps there will be a different answer for each reader.

Here are some further clues. If Madame de Mentou and Mrs Mentorn are one and the same, then the world cannot

be ordered as we think it is. And you may therefore reject the idea of any connection. But suppose the world is not ordered as we think it is?

I am a man who has spent his lifetime writing stories, works of fiction, in which everything is as it is in real life, and yet different; invented. And perhaps – I'm sure you will allow me this – perhaps a man who has spent so long in unreal worlds, among unreal people, can no longer distinguish between what is real and what is not. I can only say that I have told you the truth. Trust me.

And then there is the possibility that I am a liar. I may have made it all up – every word. I was never in Venice, either in 1786 or 1836. There never was a Madame, and she never did the things that I have attributed to her. I may have made up every detail of this absurd narrative in order to please myself by intriguing just a few readers for one last time. For the art of writing fiction is surely the art of deception.

Liar? Well of course I am a liar. I have just admitted that I have devoted my life to lies. My days have been committed to the invention and the polishing of falsehoods, so that they seemed convincing, even to me, and would arouse tears and laughter just as surely as would events in the world of reality. Perhaps more so.

And then there is the spectre of madness. That I do not relish. What could be more horrible than to be alone, here in a foreign city, and to lose control of one's senses, to have one's memories fragment and grow faint? But I have to ad-

mit the possibility. These may be the last semi-coherent jottings of a now-deranged scribbler who soon will not even know his own face in the glass.

It is entirely possible, I must face it, that Mrs Mentorn is exactly what she says she is, and no other; that we do know each other, from some years ago in England; that we were then close, and are now delighted to see each other again. It is possible that, because my mind is not as clear as it was, I have forgotten the lady entirely, and confuse her with someone else: a French lady, from long ago, who once encouraged me to write, and gave me advice on how best to proceed. I owe to that lady my life itself, and I hereby acknowledge my debt.

You will scarcely believe all that I have said. If you wish to be kind, you will settle for fiction. But the approach of senility is perhaps the most likely explanation.

Be that as it may, I have come to my own conclusions about Madame de Mentou and Mrs Mentorn. To me the truth is obvious. But I will not state my conclusions here. Instead I will say this:

As I sit here and write, I am painfully conscious that, in this last story, I have ignored many of Madame's strictures about how to hold the reader's attention. I regret those lapses, though I tell you in all sincerity that my material is such that I can do no other. But in one respect at least, I shall adhere to what Madame said to me, fifty years ago. I can hear her voice now, in my head, as I write these words:

'Do not, Mr Fenman, belabour the reader about the ears

with statements of the perfectly obvious. Do your reader the compliment of accepting that she is not without intelligence, and allow her to come to conclusions herself. She will be grateful to you for the privilege.'

*

The winter is cold here. Bitterly cold, especially for an old man. But the winter is not here yet. So I have a few months more.

During my first visit, I was, as you may recall, under Madame's protection. I had her word that no harm would come to me. But I cannot expect that protection now. So, at some time during the next few months, it is likely that some chill or fever (an ague, they call it in the fens) will carry me off. I shall have a day or two in bed, to prepare myself for whatever follows after, and then I shall be gone. My end will, I dare say, be very similar to that of the hotel manager, whose relatively swift departure from this world so alarmed my French friend.

And I wonder: Is there plague in Venice yet?

COLOPHON

This chapbook is printed through an arrangement with Lulu.com. In all other respects (cover photographs and design included) it is the work of Michael Allen.

The font used for the principal text is 11pt on 16pt Georgia.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Allen is an award-winning writer whose work first appeared in print over fifty years ago. Since then he has written twelve novels, three non-fiction books, and a collection of short stories; he has also had work successfully produced on the stage, television, and radio.

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