

LA VENEZIANA

It had been very close and thundery in the little village for some days and everyone was feeling irritable. Although it was hot and sticky working in the fields the vines still had to be tied up. There was an undercurrent of bad feeling and suppressed anger. Nobody knew quite how she did it but she chose the perfect time to make her reappearance.

The day she arrived, two women gossiping over a glass-topped counter leaned closer together and whispered, "It's her, the Veneziana's back", and, "I don't know how she's got the nerve", as a flash of colour showed briefly behind the curtain of plastic strips over the door. The two women were very similar in age and appearance although one was standing in the shadows behind the counter framed by a curtain of gnarled sausages and hams and the other was facing her on the other side of the counter holding onto a plastic shopping bag. Between them, under the glass, cheeses glowed roundly. The woman who was doing her shopping added, "Hussy", and then they resumed their previous conversation about relative merits of local hams with many a sneaking glance to the door of the shop in case they should get another tantalising glimpse. Finally, the transactions were all concluded. The question of the hams had been settled in favour of a local farmer, a few torn and grubby notes had been slid over the counter together with a bundle of freshly collected salad and several small parcels of waxed paper had been accepted in return and placed into the bulging plastic bag.

The owner of the bag now adjusted her hair and clothing, bent over ponderously to pick up the bag and then proceeded majestically out of the shop, throwing a grumbled greeting to the shopkeeper over her shoulder as she did so. A few minutes later, as she was plodding down the road, her eyes piously fixed on the ground, she noticed a pair of sensible black lace-up shoes below heavy stockings coming up the slight hill toward her. She raised her eyes to take in a dress of the same pattern and design as the shopkeeper's and then a round, wrinkled face topped by grey hair and an enormous blue plastic bowl full of wet washing.

