

## 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.

The two women stopped in the centre of the road to face one another, both panting slightly from their respective burdens and ignoring the occasional car or motor scooter that manoeuvred dexterously around them. The woman with the washing started the conversation, "Well, she's back then". The other woman planted her shopping bag between her feet, straightened up and said, "I don't know how she's got the nerve after last time". Then ensued a moderately long conversation about the shopkeeper and her wares as a few men walked by in working clothes. The woman with the shopping bag glanced briefly skyward after a short time and picked her bag up with a sigh. The Angelus bell tolled faintly in the distance. "Got to go and get the pasta on", she said as she carried on her way down the hill. The other mumbled her agreement and said, "Must get this hung out to dry before the storm comes", as she started to walk slowly up the hill with her bowl of washing absolutely steady on her head.

Within twenty minutes, both were assiduously feeding spaghetti into the heaving waters of large cooking pots and stirring bubbling sauces while closely observing the preparations of their spouses for lunch in order to see if they detected any deviation from their customary unremarkable behaviour which would indicate that they had registered the presence of "that woman" in the village. The husbands, of course, had spoken of little else with the other men present for a brief pre-prandial drink and game of cards at the bar but their tone had been mostly condemnatory. After all, it was only lunchtime and thoughts of the encroaching storm were more important. So now they remarked to their wives, "God, what a sight that Veneziana", and, "Have you seen that creature's back", with a clear conscience and then settled down with a sigh and a grunt to eat their pasta.

The instigator of all this stir in the village sat perched on the fountain in the central piazza cleaning her blood-red fingernails with a toothpick, tunelessly humming a pop song and swinging her right foot in time to it. She contrasted alarmingly with the subdued greys and greens of her surroundings with her stiff blond hair, bright make-up and red, shiny trouser suit. A shutter above her head opened slyly and a head of

