Discovery in Venice

The Prado in Madrid took the breath away, the London National Gallery deprived the nights of sleep, and the Louvre and Jeu de Paume in Paris kindled the blood to ecstatic seething as Marguerite and I, married scarcely a month, tramped around the streets of Europe in pursuit of Rembrandts and Vermeers, El Grecos and Goyas, Manets and Van Goghs. Not to mention those other creations of magnificence, Versailles, the Vatican and, if only time had sufficed, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Dahlem in Berlin. But go try to include the best of the centuries in a fleeting fugitive five-week schedule.

We had promised ourselves, Marguerite and I, the trip long before. The plan was simple. To get married, spend a week in an Albert Park motel while finalising preparations and then set off abroad before the shackles of possessions – solid brick, household appliances, furniture, babies – and the concomitant commitments to mortgages and overdrafts bound us obdurately to tethering middle-class captivity.

The plan was simple indeed. But at what cost! Marguerite in marrying me had effectively said goodbye to her family, the intense staunchly Catholic Arthur and Mary Corcoran and her brother Peter, while my parents Aryeh and Leah Goodvach, while not wholly disowning me, their only son, had made it plain that if I wished in the future to visit them, it was to be either without Marguerite or at a time when they were not otherwise entertaining their friends. Their shame, after having given me what they considered to have been a proper

Jewish upbringing – Sunday school, Jewish youth clubs, Yiddish spoken in the home, the best of Sholom Aleichem and Peretz and any number of Jewish books – was stingingly acute, and if they did attend our registry wedding, it was because they found themselves unable – it was simply not in their nature – to permit themselves to remain childless after expending so much effort upon me, a child born in wartime Europe during what were for them the most harrowing years of their overall hard and unhappy lives. I understood their grief. I was not so obtuse as to minimise it. I wished, I wished, yes, to please them, to give them that *naches* that any parent craved for from children and grandchildren. And several times I had separated from Marguerite to stand back, as it were, and study our relationship and all its implications with whatever objectivity I could muster. And Marguerite, in deference to her parents, had done the same. But we kept drifting back together, each separation followed by a reunion more violently intense than the preceding one till nothing short of overseas escape by one of us – or death, to use the hyperbole of the Romantics – could part us. For whatever she saw in me, in her there was gaiety and gentility, pleasure and sound sense and an absorbing accepting openness that banished every tiniest mote of self-consciousness that with other girls I had never been able to shed. Or perhaps rather than self-consciousness, it was the doubt that I could ever meet their later expectations as I then perceived them. Marguerite was not ambitious. Not in the material sense at least. Her conversation when we spoke was of finer artistic things, of the potential inherent in each person to realise himself creatively – through his work, his family, through one of the arts – and of service, utility and value to others, and less of houses, suburban gardens, girlfriends' children, lucrative jobs.

But perhaps I magnify the differences or distort them unfairly or seek impossibly to give rational reasons for what the overheated blood and the nerve fibres tingling in every excited quivering pore dictated – Why elaborate? Enough to say that I loved Marguerite. Those who have themselves loved

will understand; those who have not, may they yet discover for themselves the grandeur and the helplessness, the ecstasy and the brutality, the exaltation and the devastation of love.

So we married, flew overseas, left family behind, Marguerite bearing with her her father's grudging cold embrance and I with my mother's tears as at the airport – how she clung! – she said, 'Write at least. Give us back something of what you are taking away.'

We landed at the Barajas airport in Madrid on a dry sunny day in April – a day such as are depicted on picture postcards and travel brochures. Marguerite, descending the gangway ahead of me, travel-bag slung over a shoulder, wore a bright red poplin coat and a broad scarlet band around her lavish blonde hair. Among the darker Spanish girls who flitted friskily about the terminal, she stood out splendidly exceptional and I was glad when a photographer approached and said in broken English 'Pliz, Senora, una photografa per your 'usband.' Caught off guard and exhilarated by her descent to new, possibly exotic, adventures, Marguerite was captured on the crest of an enchanting spontaneity. She laughed, her teeth shone, her keen eyes squinted just that jot in the lustre of the sun and what I carried in my wallet from then on was a portrait of delight, naturalness and buoyancy that betrayed not in the slightest the tedium of what had been a long unbroken flight.

Having deposited our luggage and refreshed ourselves in a two-star hotel in the Calle de Lope de Vega, Marguerite even more than I was impatient to take to the sunwashed streets and alleyways of Madrid. A graduate in literature and fine arts with a tutorship awaiting her on our return home, she had made up her mind to visit the monument to Cervantes in the Plaza de Espana, the Palacio Real and, inevitably, and above all, the Prado Museum. While she dressed, I bought a map and guidebook from the desk clerk, returned upstairs and studied

them briefly. Marguerite, smelling appetisingly of ripe strawberries, braced her smooth downy arms around my neck. I kissed her on the nose, on each eyelid. She nibbled at my ear, blew into it, and said 'You shall be my Don Quixote and I, loyal Sancho, shall forever follow.'

Don Quixote then, and Sancho Panza, we chased after windmills in the streets of Madrid. We walked holding hands, bracing waists. We sauntered along huddled shadowed stall-lined lanes and wide stylish modern avenidas; we circled the lavish spouting fountains of Cybele, Apollo and Neptune; passed banks and offices and ancient churches; and strolled between the balmy immaculate lawns and flower beds of the Botanical Gardens, pausing repeatedly before gates and statues and facades to marvel at structures that under the European sun seemed infinitely more exquisite than anything else we had ever known or seen back home.

Then, seeing the columns at the entrance to the Prado Museum, Marguerite with a cry broke away and ran ahead.

'Last one there is a Philistine!' she called.

I paused momentarily to watch her. I couldn't help but smile. Her hair, shimmering mercury from a distance, rose and fell rhythmically. Her shoulders swayed. Her heels clicked on the pavement – like castanets, I thought. Once she looked back and beckoned me with a hand. Then she ran on, stopped before the statue in the Prado forecourt, taking deep breaths, and, as I approached, bent forward, placed a hand upon a tilted hip, Carmen-like, and mocked ever so mildly, ever so lovingly, 'You poor old man you, my hero, my knight.'

I grasped her by the waist and swung her around. We laughed. A Spaniard passing by looked at us with inquisitive eyes. He walked on with a studiously measured gait and from some way off turned around and smiled.

That night, we didn't – couldn't – sleep. Through dark hours, to the fitful flickerings of neon lights, to the humming reverberations of the odd passing car, to the disconnected

salvos of nocturnal voices exploding in the Spanish calles below, we touched, clung, mauled, loved, loved again and writhed, our bedsheets in anarchic disarray, as we were borne, Marguerite and I, on vaulting crests of exaltation, our skins moist and burning, pores tingling, muscles at electric pitch. For we had that day for the first time truly touched splendour and genius and had in turn by them been touched. Over and over, Majas and jesters crowded the darkness of our hotel-room and, with them, infantes and apostles, monarchs and rebels, angels and peasants, assaulting our inflamed senses with their breath-depriving perfection, of form, of colour, movement and expression. Over and over, Velasquez' spinning-wheel turned – we could imagine its very whirring –, El Greco's Christ agonised on the Cross, Goya's hay-makers revelled on the threshing-floor. And martyrs protested, philosophers laughed, madonnas meditated and virgins wept. By morning, we had levitated to a new enhanced ecstatic pitch that, even unslept, we could not wash, dress and breakfast quickly enough to take to the streets, to the alluring, scenic, peopled, sun-drenched streets once more.

We stayed in Madrid three days. We took a guided tour of the city which included a visit to Marguerite's Cervantes monument and the grandly sumptuous Palacio Real; as to a magnet, we also returned to the Prado three times more; we bought a filigree jewel-case and hand-carved wooden effigies of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in the Puerto del Sol, sent detailed glowing letters to our families back home and, on the last morning, coached back to the Barajas airport to board the plane, destination: London.

In a postscript to her letter, the last of three – Marguerite could never write any letter without a string of afterthoughts – she had written, 'Whatever you may say, Father, marrying Reuben was the best thing I could have done'; while in referring to Marguerite, I wrote merely, 'We are happy and the weather has been uniformly fine.'

London, to Marguerite, was Milton and Ben Jonson, Dickens and Swift; it was also the National Gallery and the British

Museum, St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. To me, a fledgeling lawyer, it was constitutional monarchy and nineteenth-Century liberalism, the Houses of Parliament, Hyde Park and the Tower of London. And it was, for totally different reasons, Petticoat Lane and Portobello Road and *A Kid for Two Farthings* and Israel Zangwill and any number of generations of Solomons and Jacobs and Levis and Beckys and Sarahs and Malkas. And for both of us, it was Covent Garden and the Royal Festival Hall, the Shaftesbury Avenue theatres and Madame Tussaud's. With Russell Square our launching-pad, we assaulted London anew each day, leaving our tiny flaking gas-heated room before nine in the morning, returning only late at night, tired to be sure, but nonetheless a-quiver, after reaping *Fidelio* or Pinter or Shakespeare or Arthur Miller. If, upon landing at Heathrow, ten days in London seemed sufficient, by the time of our departure, they had proved, however frenzied and crowded, yet too brief, mere flickers, fleeting. We left with images of Rembrandt's world-weary eyes pursuing us whichever way we turned, with the echoes of whispers magnified in their reverberations under the perfectly hemispherical dome of St. Paul's, with the resonant eloquence of dispute in the plushness and formality of the House of Commons, with the contrasting cacophony and garrulousness of toothy thick-lipped Jewish traders at the teeming Sunday market in Petticoat Lane of which, Marguerite, pausing amused over a valueless trinket, a mock-leather coat, a silken scarf, over and over remarked, 'How colourful, how novel, how quaint.' Once more we wrote home – we could not write enough – Marguerite impressing her parents Arthur and Mary Corcoran with the stateliness of that mausoleum of the greatest of England's sons that was Westminster Abbey, I elaborating jauntily on the scraggy loose-jacketed East End haberdashers, jewellers, grocers and blood-aproned fishmongers that may have reminded Mother of Warsaw and Father of Lodz.

Long before leaving for overseas, when planning our itiner-

ary, Marguerite had said, 'They say there's a wall of Da Vincis at the Louvre. And then the Impressionists – Van Goghs, Manets, Renoirs – at the Jeu de Paume. And we must climb the Eiffel Tower and visit the Arc de Triomphe, the Champs-Elysées, the Notre Dame. We won't dine at Maxim's, of course, but we can on our budget at least stand in its doorway if it rains.'

It didn't rain. Descending at Orly airport, Marguerite reminded me of the title of a film *April in Paris*. And April meant Spring, wisp-clouded skies, crispness, romance, invigoration. The city was bright, its stone facades refurbished to whiteness, the Seine by whose bank we rode to our hotel shimmered delicately under its sturdy ornamented bridges. Marguerite, like a child in her seat by the window, pointed to this structure and that and said, 'That must be the Tuilleries and there, I'm sure of it, is the Place de la Concorde and way over there is the Left Bank, the Latin Quarter – Sartre, the Existentialists, the intellectuals and all that – and the Sorbonne can't be far away and Montparnasse and . . .' Her face was mobile, immensely elastic, her excitement contagious. I leaned as close as I could towards her and smelled the luscious strawberries in her hair. I held her hand and felt its tremor, its softness, its moisture.

'A girl can lose her heart to Paris,' she said with a sunny laugh and I answered, 'Well, please, do leave some of it for me.' She puckered her lips, winked, blew a kiss and said, 'Don't worry, my Reuben, my darling, even here I shall remain all yours.'

We checked in at a hotel in a street off the Place de la Republique and quickly yielded ourselves to the Parisian metros and streets. With map, guide-book and camera, we trod, over the days that followed, hand in hand, the well-worn paths of innumerable tourists. With them, we paid homage to versatile Napoleonic grandeur, ogled at the Mona Lisa, the Delacroixes, Davids and Veroneses at the Louvre, pressed through crowded rooms to sate ourselves at the feast of Gauguins, Van Goghs, Manets, Cezannes and Degas' offered up at the Jeu de Paume. We photographed each other before the

Eiffel Tower, Arc de Triomphe and the rising column in the Place de la Bastille, and studied with awe – Marguerite with an intensity immeasurable – the immaculately-sculpted portals and the soaring Gothic vault of the Notre Dame. In Montmartre, an artist sketched a portrait of Marguerite in lilac pastel. We drank coffee among students and academics in Place St. Germain des Pres. And for a joke, we stood in the doorway of Maxim's even though it wasn't raining, and a waiter, rubbing hands, came out and asked us whether he could be of service.

Once again, we had merely blinked and ten days were gone. Every few days, we had written home, now a postcard, now a letter, cramming the last blank space with minutiae. Shortly before departing, we collected mail forwarded to the airline office. Marguerite's mother had sent a card. Its contents were brief: 'Glad to hear you're enjoying yourself. Here, all is as expected.' My mother had written a longer letter. She referred to Father's health – his varicose veins were giving trouble; commented on a friend's son's engagement – to a fine Jewish girl, a pharmacist; alluded also to another's marriage and, further, to a ship's brother's stroke. For April, she wrote, the weather was exceptionally warm and she hoped that I was not letting myself go hungry. She didn't mention Marguerite.

Marguerite, in turn, putting her mother's card into her handbag, was obviously disappointed. Biting a lip and dropping her eyes, she shrugged a shoulder, turned up a hand and said, 'Well, it's something at least.'

That dejection, manifested in pensiveness, stayed with her even as, hours later, a motor-launch transported us from the airport in Venice through Mestre to the Piazzale Roma at the northern end of the Grand Canal. As in Paris, Marguerite gazed at the passing scenery – at oil refineries, engineering workshops and islands and still more islands – but she did not point, nor jump, nor quiver nor laugh. I held an arm about her and she nestled her head against my shoulder. She breathed

evenly. A strand of blonde hair skirted an eye and traversed her lips. She was sucking at a cheek.

'A penny for your thoughts,' I said as we approached the berthing-point.

She turned towards me square-on, smiled and said, 'You'll have to make it a dollar.'

'A dollar then,' I said.

'You generous soul, you,' she said, dimples now appearing beside her mouth and wrinkles of mirth alongside her eyes.

'I'll even make it two dollars to get at your thoughts,' I said.

'Let's leave it at a penny,' Marguerite said. 'I was only thinking you do love me, Reuben, don't you, you do, don't you?'

'You'll always be mine,' I said, squeezing her hand.

'Yes,' she said, blowing me a kiss in her more lively coquettish way. 'I need someone to belong to.'

By vaporetto we traversed the length of the Grand Canal to its southern end where we disembarked at the quay outside the Doge's Palace. From there, a brisk-footed porter led us to the Hotel San Lio on the Salizzada San Lio. With the breeze in her face flapping the tails of the scarf she had wound about her head, and the smell, taste and crispness of the turquoise waters all about, Marguerite came back to life. In the iridescent slightly misty grey-blue light, she pointed out the high-coloured Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque marble palaces densely huddled on either bank. She waved good-naturedly at a gondolier who volleyed forth a lilting tremolo as we passed. Under the Rialto Bridge, she remarked upon the rust, moss and lichen that had eaten into the stone over the water tide. There were semblances of that excitement that had touched her – had touched us both – in Madrid, then in London and in Paris, so that by the time we passed through the Piazzetta and San Marco's Square bounded by the Doge's Palace, the Basilica, the Clock Tower and the Courts of Law in pursuit of our porter, I was relieved to feel the total dissipation of Marguerite's gloom as she said, 'Can you imagine? This is where

Tintoretto walked and Giorgione and Veronese and Titian and Vivaldi.' The narrow streets excited her too, as did the flagstones and humped bridges, the lines of washing strung across the green canals between opposing windows, as did further the nests of restaurants, fish-shops, bakeries and gift shops, a plenitude of them, that displayed intricate lace, jewellery and delicately-blown Venetian glass.

Of those streets and canals, Marguerite could not have enough – it was as if, she said, the very breath of history and greatness surrounded her and it made her feel small, humble, acutely ephemeral. That feeling was enhanced that afternoon as she marvelled at the golden Byzantine mosaics above the portals and on every wall, vault and cupola of San Marco's Basilica and at its brilliant gold altarpiece studded richly with silver, enamel and jewels. It was intensified, too, the next morning, by the Tiepolos and Veroneses and Tintorettos from floor to ceiling in every chamber of the ducal palace and later by the further assault of Bellinis, Giorgiones and Titians at the Accademia. Here, lagging behind me, Marguerite paused before the concentration of madonnas, saints, pietas and virgins, tracing lines and configurations, studying and commenting on attitudes of grace, agony and beatitude as, with mere summary casualness, even levity, she had done before the El Grecos and Murillos at the Prado. 'To look at you,' I had said then, ecstatic after that first wild and sleepless night in Madrid, 'one would think the artist used you as his model in portraying all this beatitude and beauty.' She had laughed then, sunnily as always, with a captivating peal. She had rummaged elastic fingers through my hair, blown deliciously into my face and said, 'Go on, you, you smooth-tongued flatterer, you.' I remembered her scent again as, walking through the luxurious high-ceilinged rooms of the Accademia, the seemingly endless suffusion of figures, landscapes and prodigal colour battered the senses to madness.

When we left, Marguerite locked her fingers into mine and said, 'Some precious material in there. It could drive any art student insane.'

A little later, as we ate on the terrace of a cafe looking out upon San Marco's Square crowded with Venetians and tourists, with a small orchestra playing jovial Italian melodies nearby, Marguerite, gazing up at the twin columns at the entrance to the Piazzetta, said, 'This place does strange things to you. Its history . . . its . . . its religiosity . . .'

If something of the historic air of Venice impinged upon Marguerite, it came to strike me too in a way additional and unforeseen. We had one day remaining to us in Venice. We were then to fly on to Florence, then Rome, then Athens. Though much in Venice was inevitably to be left unseen – we did, however, to our satisfaction capture the city's unique flavour – our itinerary did include as a final venture a visit to the Scuola di San Rocco, the repository of a goldmine of Tintorettos. Whatever time then remained to us was to be spent in unhurried browsing, in buying souvenirs, in writing home. Settling into bed at the end of our crowded second day, as I waited for Marguerite to loosen her hair, I was studying more closely our map of Venice when, along its upper border, in unimpressive print, two names caught my eye. Had I been prepared, had I known my history more proficiently, the presence of a Ghetto Vecchio and a Ghetto Nuovo in Venice would have scarcely caused surprise. Nor would I have delayed so long before embarking on what was in a sense a pilgrimage to an historic shrine.

The pigeons were scarcely awake the next morning, our last, before, downing a hurried breakfast, Marguerite and I headed northward, clattering through narrow streets and over bridges through parts where houses became starker, more closely-set, more drab, darksome and grimy. We passed pale tradesmen, shopkeepers and porters on their way to work, children skipping or dawdling in their setting out for school, dark plaited-haired women with straw baskets chattering rapidly at the tops of their voices.

'I'd never considered the idea of a ghetto in a place like this,' Marguerite said.

'Nor did I,' I answered, 'to my shame, nor did I.'

The ghetto was a cobbled square, silent and austere, enclosed by tall narrow unkempt edifices with their rectangular and arched white-rimmed windows looking like so many cavities in the tarnished facades. In the courtyard stood two wells and a water-pump between them. A solitary cat licked its paws in a doorway. Near the wells, the air was heavy with the rankness of stale fish and I could taste a saltiness which I guessed came through the arm's-breadth alleys entering the square at irregular places. Marguerite, bending over, played inquisitively with the handle of the pump. Her bright red coat and blue scarf gave to the courtyard its only animation of colour. With the sun not yet risen or, in any case, still barred from entry by the high slanted rooftops, greyness and torpor consumed the space. I walked around the perimeter of the ghetto, looking at doors, studying doorposts, seeking a hint, through a familiar name, a *mezuzah*, a Hebrew character, of the continued presence of a Jew who might still be living there. And signs I found and, suddenly quickened, I beckoned Marguerite over to see as well. Overriding a double door of oak was a stone arch lettered with Hebrew script, its gilded surface eroded to reveal coarse greyness. Within was a synagogue and museum. I looked for a bell, a knocker. Having come this far, not to visit such a shrine was an offence against reason, against taste, against sensibility. I banged on the door, received no response, banged again.

Marguerite laid a hand on my arm.

'I'm afraid you'll only rouse the ghosts,' she said.

She drew my attention to a notice in Italian which we deciphered as best we could as indicating that the synagogue was closed pending renovations following recent internal damage.

'A thousand Venetian churches open and its only synagogue has to be closed,' I said, piqued.

Marguerite, having moved some distance away, looked at me with a wry ironic expression. 'I hate to tell you this, Reuben,' she said. Beckoning me with a finger, she pointed towards another doorway. 'But I think that's two of them.'

And indeed there was another synagogue but, to my chagrin, it too was closed as was a little corner glass-blower's shop in which, to my astonishment, delight and, ultimately, fury, stood row upon row of glass figurines in the display window, figurines I couldn't lay my hands on, figurines of spectacled rabbis with long coats and long beards, of Jewish husbands and wives, and entire scenes depicting marriages under canopies, circumcisions, Sabbath benedictions, the festivals Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles and finally scenes of communal prayer before an Ark.

'How quaint!' Marguerite said. 'How picturesque and old-worldly!'

They *were* quaint, they *were* old-worldly, but with cutting acuteness, they burred into my awareness the resurgent recognition, repressed till now, that they were a part of me or of my past or, if not of my own experienced past, then that of my parents, my grandparents and of their ancestors who had carried forward a tradition, already so ageless, that with me had become diluted and withered and as good as lapsed. I wanted then to linger on in the ghetto to recapture, restore, the breaths of the generations that had slowly stifled here incarcerated in rankness and prohibition but, looking around once more from the corner at the impoverishment of the square in this city of otherwise extravagant excess, I gritted my teeth at the flooding sensation that the ghetto and I were somehow as one in waste and dispossession until, turning to Marguerite, I grasped her hand, drew her forward, wholly to her uncomprehending bewilderment, and led her from the place over stone and bridge and canal, saying as she herself had said the day before, 'This place . . . this place does strange things to you.'

I had escaped the ghetto but its aura of starkness clung even as with Marguerite I wandered, scarcely heeding now, through the interior of the Scuola di San Rocco. The columns, the friezes, the marble and the profusion of Tintorettos on wall and ceiling crushed with their colour and massiveness and representations. Among the tourists, scores of them shuffling along the hall and between the rooms, I could scarcely

breathe. I was out of place, oppressed by the force and tyranny of a dark religion ridden through with superstition, fable, mysticism and fancy while Marguerite, her complexion pale against the high-toned redness of her coat, progressed slowly from canvas to canvas, pausing before each as if she could not have her fill of annunciations, nativities, baptisms, last suppers and crucifixions.

On our way out, Marguerite walked slowly, pensively. She looked about. She seemed bewildered, remote, somehow, for the first time since I had known her, unreachable. Her cheeks were set harder; her lips, normally moist and healthy, were dry; her eyebrows were puckered. She hesitated, then pointed at the Church of the Frari opposite the Scuola. It was a large domineering Gothic structure and the guide-book referred to two magnificent altarpieces and to the works of Titian to be found there.

'Before we go back to the hotel, Reuben,' Marguerite said. 'One last fling, I just want to flit in and out to satisfy my curiosity.'

Biting my tongue, I followed her, stood with her before the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, stood with her too before the Virgin of the Pesaro family and before Bellini's calm Madonna in the sacristy.

'The beauty of it all, Reuben,' she murmured, her gaze elevated, high, steady, 'the sanctity. Those faces, those angels, those people . . .'

Barely outside again, as we walked across the square in front of the church, Marguerite came to a stop.

'My scarf, Reuben,' she said, tapping her shoulders, her neck, searching also through the pockets of her coat. 'Did you see it?'

I looked about.

Marguerite laid a hand on my arm.

'Wait for me here,' she said. 'I'm going back inside. I must have dropped it there.'

She hurried back towards the church, almost ran, stepped

this way and that as two elderly Italian women in black, entering, blocked the doorway.

In the square I waited, gazed at the murky green water of the stagnant canal, took deep liberating breaths even of its acridity and welcomed the softness of the mellow April morning sun. People, both worshippers and tourists, entered and left the church. Two men with arms straddling each other's shoulders sang a ditty, then laughed. A mother called after her straggling toddler. A gondolier in sailor's blouse and straw hat hurried by.

I waited, then stopped waiting. Marguerite was taking an unduly long time. I walked towards the church entrance, became aware as I had not been before of polish and of some vaguer mustiness of aging cedarwood and camphor. The steps of those who had gathered there echoed in the vaults, whispers reverberated in a hum. And above the altarpieces with their opulent Titians burned numerous candles in golden candelabra and all about there beat once more that turbulence of colour, heaviness and excess – of excess, excess, excess – that constricted my breath with rank distaste.

And then I saw her and nearly cried out, nearly let voice shatter the quiet of that hallowed sanctum. The lost scarf had been a ploy, I saw, and felt in my suddenly-tingling quivering flesh the bite of resentment at the deception she had wrought. But I could not sustain it. She was too beautiful, too pure, too magnificent as I saw her kneeling, praying before the Virgin Mary, her fingers clasped, her chin raised, her eyes, normally so alive and mobile, now uplifted, still, reverential. The light from the candelabra fell on her face, her lips flickered, her shoulders were drawn forward. It may have been a trick of the light but her cheeks, her hands, her hair, all these, all bore the colour, contour and texture of the countless Madonnas before which we had stood. And I wanted to reach out to her then, and to touch, and to hold, but, seeing myself an intruder upon that which could only have been called her soul, I backed out to wait again in the square before the church, aware, acutely,

desperately, achingly aware, as I had been on fleeing the ghetto, of my own inner grey, hollow and dismal poverty.

When, finally, she emerged, tripping down from the shadow of the portals into the light, Marguerite was all mobility and familiarity again. Seeing me, she hurried forward, waved her scarf and called out, 'I found it.'

Then she paused.

'But Reuben,' she said, 'you look so serious. I can count, I swear, at least two wrinkles on your brow.'

I reached out, took her willing hands, then touched her own immaculate smoothness.

'I hope,' I said, 'I hope that we are still one when we are nothing else but wrinkles.'

She laughed. Openly. Deliciously.

'My, you *are* cryptic,' she said.

She tossed her head. Her hair rose and fell, catching the light. I saw her running sprightly towards the Prado, saw her pose against the Eiffel Tower, saw her, self-assured and happy, accept my ring while beside us Arthur and Mary Corcoran stood mute and grim and Mother wept and blew her nose. Above us, flimsy wisps of cloud moved slowly, a flock of pigeons fluttered by, the air in the streets and over the canals was salty and misty and cool. And as we crossed the Rialto Bridge on the way back to our hotel, I held Marguerite's hand, I clasped it, clung to it, clung to it with all the firmness and tenaciousness of desperate need, feeling beneath my feet the texture of feathers, of crystal, and of straw, all that earlier was stone and solidity and bond between us become at once so quickly uncertain, precarious and brittle.

mezuzah – parchment in a case inscribed with scriptural passages and affixed to the door-post of a Jewish house.
naches – pleasure, pride.