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AN AMERICAN IN VENICE

MEANWHILE, IN 1926, that girl named Giulietta and I got married. I remember the wedding lunch, where there were more wine bottles than there were guests; and that evening we went to Padua for our honeymoon. The next morning we dashed in and out of what we thought was the Church of Saint Anthony, Padua's patron saint, and headed back to Venice the same day, since I had to return to work the following morning. It was only years later I learned that in our haste that morning we had gone to the wrong church. Saint Anthony, forgive me!

I was still in Venice in 1927, working at the Hotel Europa-Britannia, a beautiful hotel owned by a German

family named Walter, and it was Signor Walter who sealed my fate.

"Cipriani," he said one day, "you're going to tend the bar."

"Why?"

"Because you have a way with the customers. They like you, and you know languages." (I had learned English on my own.)

I was not altogether convinced that Signor Walter was right, but I rallied my enthusiasm and became the Europa's barman.

Now, if I speak somewhat nostalgically about the bar at the old Hotel Europa, it is not because I remember that time as the golden age of the gastronomy business, or think that the trade has since gone down the drain. I am not a pessimist. If anyone asks how I am, I always say "fine." If it is a friend who asks, he will be happy to know I am well, and if it is not a friend, the answer will irritate him a bit. I have never been one to say things are going to wrack and ruin, but I do think that everyone seems to have less time nowadays than they did in the past. Everything has to be organized to a prearranged schedule; speed is the keynote of travel, and people live, eat, drink, and even make love with their eyes on the clock.

But in the days when I first started tending bar, the places where people would get together were quiet cafés and hotel bars. A host of people frequented cafés and bars; they sat down together for a drink and relaxed conversation. They were nice times. There were healthy pauses in the course of the day. People set aside more

time for themselves, and I think that one day soon they will again feel like sitting down quietly and talking to one another. And perhaps they will want a cocktail to boost their morale.

In those days the Hotel Europa was a meeting place for quite a few young Venetians with time on their hands. They came partly to be together and partly in search of adventure with tourists passing through, the young and the not so young. There were aristocratic visitors, too, from all over Europe, people of substantial means; one must remember that in those days, not everyone could afford to travel.

In addition to the Europa there was the Grand Hotel, the Danieli, and the Bauer Grünwald, all frequented by these customers, and I started to think: "Why not open a bar, just like the hotel bars but in a *fondamenta* in Venice, an elegant bar, but one customers can enter without running into a gauntlet of porters in braided uniforms or passing through a splendid but intimidating reception hall?"

What I did not have was the money.

I had spent the winter season of 1927 tending bar at the Bellevue Hotel in San Remo, where to my misfortune one of my customers was a certain Mr. Utesky. He was a charming man, self-assured, a good customer, the picture of health, well dressed, suntanned — in short, the classic example of a man who inspires trust. But that type may also be the classic example of the swindler. Isn't a swindler always well mannered and courteous? He spends days or even months working his victims so

capably that when he makes his move, it always happens in a way that seems utterly natural, almost what you should have expected all along.

Of course I have met quite a few in my career, big-time and small-time swindlers, and I must confess that I have even admired some of them for their bravura. There are all types, from the one I have never seen before who rushes in to ask, "Cipriani, I forgot my wallet, could you lend me a thousand lire," to the captain of industry who cheats on the number of sandwiches he has taken from the counter. There are thousands of customers every year who take an ashtray to add to their collection, all of them respectable people, people who have never stolen a thing in their life.

One evening a customer leaned over to me and whispered, "Look at the lady. She just put a table napkin in her purse."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Positive."

A difficult and rather embarrassing situation, but after a moment's thought I realized how to deal with it: I added an item to the tab, "export: 2,500 lire."

The woman asked for the bill, looked at it, and called the waiter. Then the waiter called me.

"What's this export?" she asked.

"That's the napkin, madame. But if you prefer, we could exchange it for an ashtray, which is cheaper."

"Fine," she said without batting an eye. She took the napkin out of her purse, and I brought her an ashtray, neatly wrapped up in plain brown paper.

But I was talking about Mr. Utesky, a great gambler at the casino and endowed with all the qualities I mentioned. I still remember his incredible skill in getting me to lend him all my earnings for the season. He disappeared at once, and I never saw him again. I was disheartened when I returned to Venice, not least because it was no easy matter to explain to Giulietta what had happened.

I went back to the Europa for the summer season, on my guard against swindlers, of course, but the experience with Mr. Utesky had not diminished my youthful, trusting nature. And it was a good thing, because if I had been any less open to new acquaintances, I would not have gotten to know the young man without whom Harry's Bar would never have progressed beyond the status of a mere pipe dream.

Harry Pickering, a quiet young student, was American. He was staying in the hotel with an old aunt, the aunt's young companion, and a dog. All of them were regular customers of the Europa bar.

Harry's family had sent him off to Italy with his aunt to treat an early form of alcoholism. But he was bored traveling the world without friends of his own, and he was drowning his boredom in cocktails. The aunt and her young friend were always good-humored, and the Pekingese was resigned. The little entourage did not see much of Venice, perhaps a glimpse of Piazza San Marco once a day, but they saw a lot of the bar. With light and easy smiles they ordered every kind of liquor, preferably strong cocktails, but their old faithful was always a

double bourbon and 7UP, something fizzy to remind them that their throats were still there.

They started about eleven in the morning. They would sit at the bar for aperitifs, have lunch on the terrace overlooking the Grand Canal, and come back to the bar for a drink in the afternoon. The evening was the same. Anyone who wanted to open a small bar would have made a fair profit serving just the three of them, especially Harry, the least cheerful of the group.

They had been at the Europa for two months when Harry had an argument with his aunt and her gigolo, who checked out and left him alone with the dog. This did not keep Harry from the bar, but he drank less and less. I was alarmed by this unforeseen change in his habits, and I tried to discover the reason for it. I surmised that either Mr. Pickering was ill, or his money was running out. The latter idea was the right one. After a few days, I asked if he needed money. He looked surprised, but hopeful as well.

"Why," he asked, "would you lend me money?"

"If you need it," I replied.

So, trying to drive visions of Utesky out of my mind and finding the courage to tell Giulietta, I decided to lend him ten thousand lire, a lot of money for a simple bartender like myself who had started out earning three lire an hour in a pastry shop.

He went off happy, and rather less happy than he, I was left to wait. A month went by, then another, and not a word. But I was sure I had not made a mistake. This Mr. Pickering had to be a decent boy. It was

written all over his face. That was the winter of 1930. America was in the throes of the Great Depression, but I never lost hope. Finally on a cold February morning I saw him come into the bar. He made quite a fuss over me.

"Cipriani, thank you so much. Here is your money. And to show you how grateful I am, take this as well. We can use it to open a bar together."

"This as well" was forty thousand lire.

"Let's call it Harry's Bar," he said.

And I was happy.

One morning a few days later, someone knocked on the glass window that opened onto the *calle* behind the Europa bar. It was Giulietta. "Giuseppe," she said, "I've found Harry's Bar."

Fifteen feet by thirty, it was the cordage warehouse, and it was up for rent. There was even room for a small kitchen and a storage room in the back.

I liked it at once because it was at the end of a dead-end street. At that time there was no bridge connecting the street to Piazza San Marco. This meant that the customers would have to come there on purpose, and couldn't just stop in as they were passing by. That is the way I wanted it. To this day people have to come to Harry's Bar on purpose. And as if to emphasize this fact, we have no sign, only the name etched in the windowpanes.

At that time the Baron Gianni Rubin de Cervin,

who owned the beautiful Palazzo Albrizzi and later became the director of the Naval Museum in Venice, was among the young customers of the bar at the Europa. I asked him to help me decorate the bar.

He understood the effect I wanted, and he had a real gift for seeing how to achieve it. In the years I worked in hotels I had learned what should be done and, more important, what should be avoided. I wanted a simple, elegant place with two essential features: the customers must not feel oppressed by the decor, and there had to be light. I never liked dark places; darkness serves to hide something, and people only whisper in the dark.

The interior Cervin designed was pure art deco with hand-painted marine motifs and figures on the walls; it looked more like a ship's bar than one on land. Near the actual bar he placed large armchairs, which were soon replaced with smaller armchairs, where people could sit and eat the few dishes — often cooked by my wife — that were served in those early years.

Baron Gianni lived well into his eighties, and to the end of his life he came to Harry's Bar every day for a drink or two and would usually end up staying for a meal. I had originally offered him a partnership in Harry's Bar in return for doing the decor, but he had refused, preferring to be paid in cash. For the rest of his life he complained that he had made a terrible mistake in not taking me up on my first offer.

I myself designed special three-legged tables that would not tip or wobble on the uneven floor. The bar itself, which stretched right up to the door, offered an

immediately accessible support for the shy and insecure. I'll never cease to be amazed at how shy people can be; perhaps everyone is slightly shy, even the ones who seem least so.

There were some compulsory requirements in Harry's Bar. The space was what it was, so the tables, for example, while they had to be comfortable, had to be small as well. And everything else had to be in proportion, including plates, glassware, and silver. Luxury restaurants — it was certainly the case then and to some extent even today — crushed the diner under a mountain of heavy silver that only a giant could handle with any ease. So I miniaturized, which is to say that, for Harry's Bar, I decided on dessert knives, forks, and spoons, which are elegant, light, and well balanced. I didn't want my customers to have to be weight lifters to enjoy a meal.

A hundred little things go into making a success in my business. For example, I have always considered it a question of honor to make sure that someone dining on shrimps does not get a whiff of codfish cooking on the stove. Where smell is concerned, the kitchen has nothing to do with the dining room.

I went into business on May 13, 1931.

If all the people who claimed to have been the first to set foot in Harry's Bar had actually come the first day of business, the bar would have had to be as big as Pizazza San Marco. It was an immediate success. One of

my colleagues from the old days at the Hôtel Monaco joined me, a waiter named Toffolo who was mad about cooking.

Berto Toffolo — he now has his own restaurant in the Friuli region, about fifty miles outside of Venice — was a small wonder in the kitchen. I will never forget his shrimp risotto, the crayfish Armorican; and most of all his hot and cold sandwiches. He was an incredible man. The bar could be full of diners, but everything around him was always in perfect order as he worked in the kitchen. It all looked as if he had nothing to do, yet nobody was kept waiting a minute longer than necessary.

One of my first customers was an extremely serious, formal Englishman who drank much and spoke little, partly because he had an incredible stammer. To have any kind of extended conversation with him meant abandoning the other diners and dedicating half a day to him. He stayed at a nearby hotel and would take the few steps to the bar, climb onto a stool, and daintily sip three or four martinis. His fairly pale forehead would color slightly as the alcohol got the blood moving, loosening his tongue enough to order a fifth martini with hardly a stutter or stammer.

I had no idea what his business was, nor did I care to. All I knew was his name, Colin Hawks, because once, when he was less tongue-tied than usual, he managed to utter it in one breath. Sometimes he took his glass to a table, brought tiny scraps of paper out of his pocket, and covered them with a minute dense script.

One day Mr. Hawks came into Harry's Bar carrying a suitcase. "I'm l-leaving," he stammered. I offered him my hand across the bar; he took it and held it while he uttered what must have been the longest speech he had held in months. Between stammers of every kind, he asked me how to get to the garage in Piazzale Roma on foot. He wanted to walk. He had become so enamored of my bar that he had spent most of his days and evenings there and had seen very little of Venice.

What could I say? Go outside, walk straight ahead, turn right, then left, and then ask once, twice, ten times what direction to go? With his speech difficulty, it would have taken him a week at least.

"Mr. Hawks," I said reassuringly, "if you can wait half an hour till I'm free, I will walk you there."

Thirty minutes went by, I took off my white jacket, and off we went. We ambled slowly through *campi* and *campielli*, past *corti* and *fondamente*. I played guide, and he just beamed. Some of his pleasure may have come from not having to express his admiration for the city in speech. When we reached the garage, he put his suitcase in the trunk, shook my hand and thanked me, and then drove off.

A couple of weeks later, a customer burst into the bar waving a copy of the *London Daily Mail*.

"Cipriani, this is about you!"

Me, in the newspaper? I was excited, and frightened too. I quickly examined my conscience: Had I unintentionally offended some peer in incognito who was

getting me back by telling the world of his misadventures in Venice? Not at all. The newspaper addressed its readers, loyal subjects of the crown, more or less in this vein:

If you happen to be in Venice and want to know something about the city, forget the travel agencies and the tourist offices. Go to Harry's Bar. There you will find Giuseppe Cipriani, who can satisfy your every need. Go see him, and you will suddenly find yourself in a friendly city welcoming you with open arms.

I looked at the byline. Colin Hawks worked for the *Daily Mail*. And what a splendid way he had chosen to thank me for a simple courtesy!

A great many articles have been published about Harry's Bar since then. Thousands of things have been written in pursuit of the secret of its success. Dozens upon dozens of journalists have given their own versions of what Harry's Bar is to them. I think the real secret, however, is that there is no secret. Anyone who visits Harry's Bar always finds three things: quality, a smile, and simplicity.

It is not true, for example, that the secret of a good barman is the strange concoctions he invents. If you discount the short-lived aberrations that unscrupulous bartenders occasionally invent in an effort to stir up a little profitable notoriety at the expense of their customers' stomachs, there are actually very few variations

on the five possible starting points of any cocktail: gin, vodka, whiskey, cognac, and rum. The classic drinks can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The trick is to make them well — conscientiously, and, as in everything, with love — and to fit them to the particular taste of the individual drinker, and even to his various moods. In fact, a good barman will never make the drinks exactly the same. With one glance, he has to sense whether his customer wants to have his martini drier than usual, or sweeter. And he should have the drinks waiting for his regulars before they appear at the door.

In the course of my career as a barman I have had my share of strange requests. Take the martini, for example. Hemingway smiled when he ordered a "Montgomery," which he explained was a martini made with the same proportion of gin to vermouth that the famous British general preferred when he led his soldiers against the enemy — fifteen to one.

One customer liked me to pour a little vermouth over the ice in the shaker and then throw it out before adding the gin. He called it an in-and-out martini. Another one asked me to show the vermouth bottle to the gin bottle but not to put any in his martini.

These special tastes aside, a good martini has to be dry, icy, undiluted, and served in the right amount in the right glass. The bona fide martini drinker sips it very slowly, drop by drop.

One summer day a party of six Italians came in and ordered six martinis. They may have been expecting a sweet vermouth martini, but in any case they liked

what they got — ice cold, dry, and strong. They poured it down in a single gulp and then went out.

They came back half an hour later, all in good spirits, and ordered six more martinis. The men in the group had pinned little notes on their lapels. That piqued my curiosity, and I leaned forward to see what was written: "We have to return to Mantua. Whoever finds us, please get us to the garage in Piazzale Roma by six thirty A.M."

I have always avoided making a show of preparing a cocktail. There are bartenders who look like marionettes the way they move, the way they handle the shaker, flipping bottles into the air and catching them in flight. I wouldn't be surprised if they used canned orange juice!

People who have something they want to forget usually order a martini — maybe because it is strong and dry. I have never seen anyone drown his sorrows in champagne.

I remember an old customer, a German prince who had married an extremely wealthy woman and who for a long time came to Harry's Bar every evening for a single martini. One evening he came in as usual, drank his martini, and immediately ordered a second one. I gave him another, and then another again. Gradually, his face began to sag more and more.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"A lot," he said, "almost everything. My wife has decided she is going to sleep with her lover tonight in my house!"

I was familiar with his situation, and knew full well that his wife's millions gave his domestic tragedy an almost comic flavor. I also knew he had a keen sense of humor. So I leaned over the counter, and lowering my voice, I asked, "Tell me something, do you want to get a job?"

"I don't know," he replied. "I've never had one."

"Do you have enough to live on?"

He gave me a sad look and shook his head.

"In that case," I said, "I know you have a beautiful house in the country. I'll fix you another martini, then you call a taxi. Go to the country, sleep on it overnight, and then forget about it. Tomorrow is another day, and things will look different. Think of it as a necessity."

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"I think it's the best idea."

He came back the next day. He had his old aplomb and seemed to be in excellent humor.

"Sleep well?" I asked.

"Like a baby. Thanks for your advice, Cipriani."

And Harry?

From the very beginning, Harry Pickering loved Harry's Bar almost more than I did, so much so, in fact, that in the early years he was without a doubt his own best customer. He took his habitual seat at the bar, drank to his heart's content, and then went back to his hotel, happy as an onion in a Gibson. But the day-to-day responsibilities of running the business were not for him.

When he broached the idea of selling me his share a few years later, I cast about for a way to find the necessary money. Before long, I had managed to save up a sum that was almost equal to the tab he had run up at the bar, and when we added it all together, it was more than what we'd agreed on. After that, he drank a little less, but whenever he was in Venice, he was still one of our best customers.

Here ends the autobiography of Giuseppe Cipriani, and here begins the story told by Arrigo Cipriani.



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BELLINIS IN PARADISE

I STILL FIND IT HARD TO BELIEVE that my father is dead and gone forever.

After a violent influenza, he insisted on being released from the hospital and going back home. There was a childlike cunning in the way he convinced the doctors that in his own room, he would have everything he needed, from a call bell to his eyeglasses, ten pairs of them. He was always fumblingly putting them on and taking them off, and each time he would look around with the curiosity of a blind man seeing things for the first time. In fact, he already knew the end was at hand. He was so in touch with his brain that he could even show me where the seat of his illness was. "Something happened here," he would say, pointing to a spot behind one of those big ears of his. "This is where the