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Opening extract from

The Angel of Venice

Written by

Mary Hoffman

Published by

Barrington Stoke Ltd

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First published in 2014 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library upon request

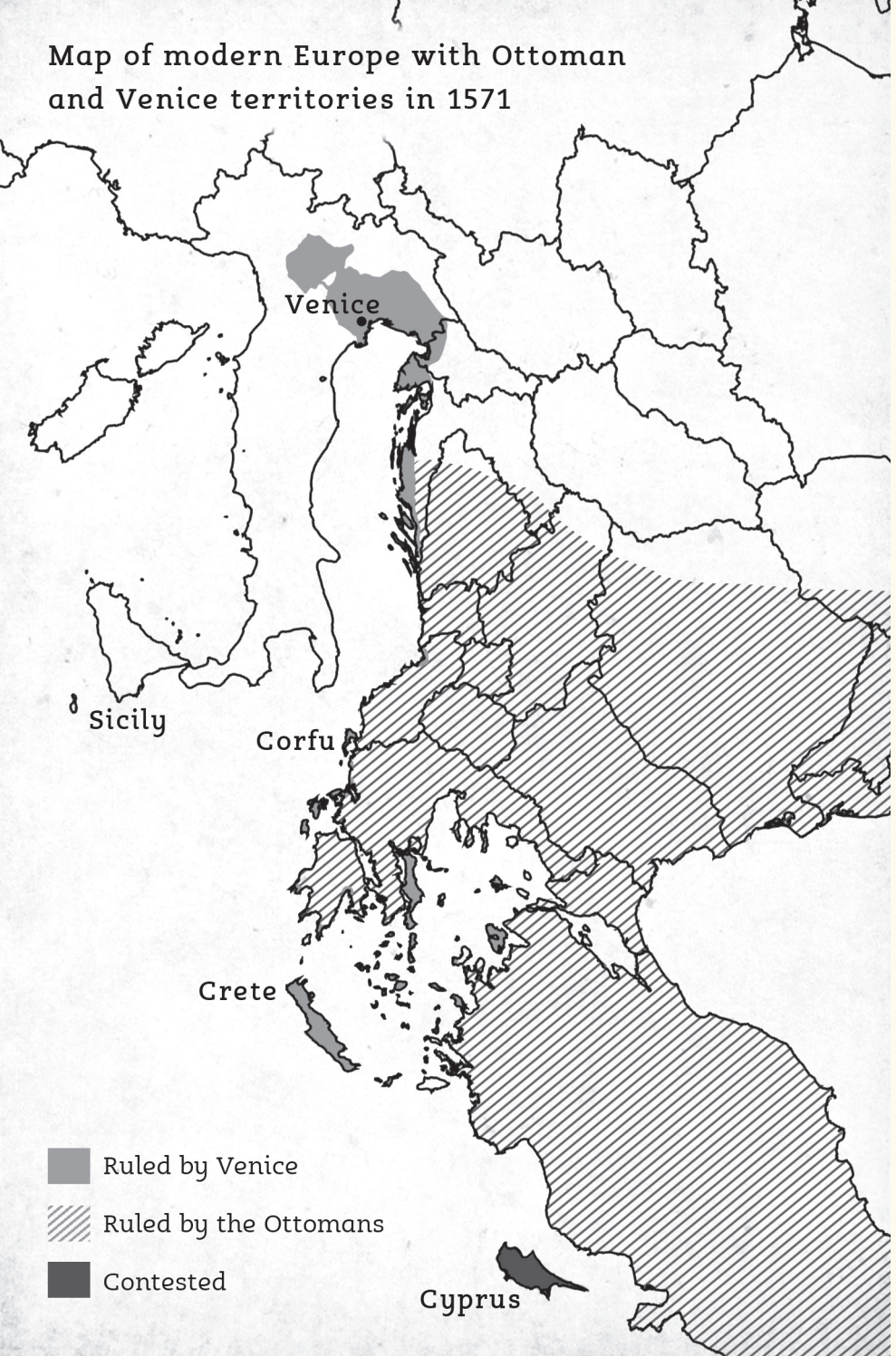
ISBN: 978-1-78112-402-4

Printed in China by Leo

ANGEL *of* VENICE

MARY HOFFMAN

Barrington Stoke



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1

A Growing Boy

"Fetch the water, Luca!"

"Chop the wood, Luca!"

"Luca, light the fire!"

All my life, people had been telling me what to do. And what not to do.

"Don't cheek your brother!" they would say.

"Listen to your father!"

"You mustn't steal fruit!"

The last one was very hard to obey. I was a growing boy of 16 and I was always hungry.

There weren't all that many gardens in Venice but there were some near our house with

fruit trees whose branches hung over their walls. So wasn't that fair game?

But my parents were very strict. I mustn't take the fruit.

I was the youngest of seven children. My three big brothers worked with our father in the great shipyard of Venice – the Arsenale. They were carpenters, and they worked with all the different kinds of wood that warships are made of. The galleys of Venice were supposed to be the best ships in the world. They were built to last. You could fling an ordinary warship together in a shorter time but the Arsenale was famous for its careful work and the high quality of its galleys.

For the last few years I had worked there too, but I was not trusted with much important work. My main job was sweeping up the wood shavings and putting them in bags to take to the blacksmiths to feed their fires. And there were always a few bags to take home for our family's cooking fire.

But every now and again, Father showed me how to do something more skilled, like planing the walnut wood that was used for the stern of a galley.

I loved the swirling shapes the plane revealed under the surface of the wood. And I loved the smell of the workshop. But all the dust and shavings made me so thirsty. There I was, only feet away from the canals, surrounded by water but always with such a dry throat.

At the end of the day, when I walked home carrying the bags of shavings, the sight of ripe peaches hanging from the trees that leaned over the walls of rich men's houses was just too tempting.

"You'd better wipe your mouth before you go indoors," my friend Fina said, "or your parents will beat you for stealing fruit again."

Fina lived in the building next door. She and I had known each other since we were babies. Her mother was a widow who took in washing, and as we grew up, we often met at the well in the middle of the square where we lived.

There was always a line of people waiting to fetch water from the well so we had plenty of time to talk.

Fina was the first person to find out that I did not want to be a carpenter like all the other men in my family. What I wanted was to go to sea.

"Well I don't want to be a washerwoman," Fina would say, "but what choice do I have?"

"Maybe you will marry a rich man?" I said. "Then you wouldn't have to work. You are pretty so perhaps a count or even a prince will come into the square one day and see you and take you to live in his grand house."

"Well if that ever happens," said Fina, "I promise you can come and eat the peaches and apricots from our garden. No need to steal them."

But she didn't really think that would be her future. And in the end it wasn't a rich young man who came into our square – it was a rich young woman.

Angelina Santo was from one of the oldest noble families in Venice and the minute I saw her, I fell madly in love with her.

"Close your mouth before you catch a fly in it," Fina said, the day we first saw Angelina cross the square with her servant woman.

"Can you see her too?" I asked. "Or am I having a vision? Surely that is an angel?"

"Looks like a girl to me," said Fina. "A girl who has never had to fetch water from a well or wait in a line for anything."

"But what a girl!" I said. "Her hair is as gold as an angel's in a painting. Her skin is like the flesh of a white peach."

"You better had run away to be a sailor," said Fina. "I don't think you'll ever be a poet."

I took no notice of my friend. "But what is she doing in our square?" I asked. "I've never seen her before. I would remember."

"No idea," Fina said. "She looks as if she's on her way somewhere."

It took many months for me to find out that my angel walked twice a week to a lesson with a famous music teacher – he was too disabled to walk to her house. And it took even longer to find out her name. In the end, Fina learned it from a friend.

But soon I learned the angel's routine and I made sure I was always in the square when she passed, if I was not at work. I started to leave the shipyard early on Thursdays so that I could see her walk back from her lesson.

One day I bowed to her.

My reward was to hear her laugh, like the water tinkling in a fountain.

After that, I always bowed when I saw her and she always gave me a smile, even though her servant woman frowned at me.

From then on, I thought of nothing but how I could manage to speak to Angelina. How I could give her a present that would make her notice me.

I was so obsessed with Angelina and her beauty that I didn't really notice what was going on in the shipyard. My father and brothers were working extra hard and I had even more bags of shavings to carry home each day.

If I hadn't been so busy thinking about Angelina, I might have realised why Venice needed more and more galleys made at top speed.

The city was going to war.