Two tiers of tall gothic windows were ablaze with candlelight as the Lauritzens and I approached the landing stage of Palazzo Pisani-Moretta. The Carnival ball was already in progress. Costumed men and women stood on the balconies above us, drinks in hand, looking out over the Grand Canal and the glimmer of lights reflected on the night-blackened water.

"The façade is late-fifteenth-century Gothic," said Peter. "Notice the especially fine examples of quatrefoil tracery above the windows of the first piano nobile. They're derived, as you've no doubt already surmised, from the Doge's Palace." Peter was wearing a long black cape and a black mask.

"Trespassing!" said Rose. "Think of it! How horribly embarrassing for Woody Allen. But Casson was quite right to do it, you know, if he really means to find out what happened at the Fenice." Rose's hair was combed in an upsweep, with a string of pearls laced through it. She wore a bejeweled black satin mask and an evening dress that was a column of black chiffon. "He's one of the few honest, incorruptible prosecutors we've got left. A white knight! I just pray he doesn't suddenly self-destruct like all the others."

"Then, in the eighteenth century," said Peter, "the strong-willed Chiara Pisani-Moretta redecorated the palazzo at enormous expense, all while laying siege to the courts, hoping to have her brother declared illegitimate so she could spend his share of the family patrimony on the palazzo as well."

Rose lifted the hem of her gown in preparation for stepping onto the dock. "But, I mean, one does feel sorry for Woody Allen," she said. "First his jazz concert gets burned out of the Fenice; then he's arrested for dropping by as a gesture of sympathy." Rose became distracted by a man in a green mask who was alighting from one of the water taxis ahead of ours. "Oh, Peter, look. That's Francesco Smeraldi." Then, turning to me, she said, "He's a poet nobody reads, because as soon as he finishes a poem, he locks it in a bank vault. He used to teach writing and poetry to schoolchildren until it was found out that he – "

"No, no, Rose, you're wrong," said Peter. "That's not Francesco Smeraldi at al»l. It's – "

"Well, how can anybody tell with that mask he's got on! All I can see is a mouth and chin. Anyway, whether that's him or not, Francesco Smeraldi did fall out of favor when it was discovered he'd taken a group of children on a tour of loos to read the graffiti!"

At the water entrance, we stepped onto a carpeted platform flanked by two flaming torches and walked into a cavernous entry hall with large, gilt-framed lanterns hanging from dark beams. A monumental staircase at the far end led to the first piano nobile and a vast center hall with ceilings richly frescoed in the rococo style. The room was illuminated by nine huge glass chandeliers and six sconces, all of them aglow with masses of tall white candles. Tonight every room in the palace was lit exclusively with candlelight.

The crowd numbered several hundred. The din of their voices had the excited, high-pitched sound of people enjoying the release from stiff formality that masks and costumes conferred, even though most of the people were recognizable despite their masks. There were kisses on both cheeks, overheard snatches of conversation— "skiing in Cortina," "up from Rome," "bellissimo!" – and waves of the hand to friends glimpsed across the room.

We stood at the center of the room, attended by white-jacketed waiters circulating with trays of wine and pink Bellinis. The Bellinis were authentic: Tonight's party was being catered by Harry's Bar, the establishment that invented the drink, a combination of prosecco and the juice of fresh white peaches.

"This palazzo was vacant for over a century," said Peter. "It was without central heat, plumbing, gaslight, or electricity until 1974, when it was lovingly restored. The remarkable thing is that the detailing is not only original but intact the frescoes, the mantelpieces, the stucco ornamentation. It took three months just to clean the floor, and what has emerged from the grime is a brilliant example of eighteenth-century terrazzo in perfect condition. As I always say: Nothing preserves like neglect."

"Alvise!" Rose called out to a shortish, florid-faced, bald-headed man who was walking in our direction at a regal pace. He lifted Rose's hand and nodded toward it, then shook hands with Peter.

"Now, Alvise Loredan is someone you must meet!" Peter said as he introduced me. "Count Loredan is a quintessential Venetian and a member of one of the oldest patrician families."

Alvise Loredan fixed his gaze on me and beamed. He had an aristocratic hooked nose, jowls, a fringe of hair, and a solid jaw that in profile I could imagine adorning a coin.

"There have been three doges in my family," he said in English, holding up three fingers. "Three!"

"Indeed," said Peter, "and Alvise is too modest to tell you, so I will: One of the Loredan doges was Leonardo Loredan, the sixteenth-century doge whose magnificent portrait by Giovanni Bellini is arguably the finest Venetian portrait ever painted. The pity is, it hangs in the National Gallery in London rather than here in Venice."

Loredan nodded. "My family goes back to the tenth century in Venice. Loredans won every war they ever fought in, and they fought in all of them. This is very important! If the Loredans hadn't defeated the Turks, first in 1400 and then in Albania, the Turks would have crossed the Adriatic, occupied the Vatican, and wiped out Chris-tianity!"

Count Loredan was alternating between English and Italian now.

"In the state archives," he said, "there are letters between popes and the Loredan doges using the familiar tu form of address. They were on the same level, both princes. I have copies. I can show you.

I have a copy of a letter from Henry VIII to Leonardo Loredan, calling him 'our dearest friend.' It's all there. This is very important!"

"And," said Peter, "as for Loredan palaces...

"There are several in Venice," the count said proudly. "Palazzo Loredan in Campo Santo Stefano, where Napoleon established the Venetian Institute of Science, Letters and Arts. Palazzo Corner Loredan, which is part of the Venice town hall. Palazzo Loredan degli Ambasciatori, which the Holy Roman Empire rented from my family for many years as its embassy to the Republic of Venice. Palazzo Loredan-Cini in Campo San Vio; it was the home of Don Carlos, the pretender to the throne of Spain. And ... did I say Palazzo Loredan in Campo Santo Stefano? Yes, I said that one ... Napoleon... the institute... very important. The most famous one is the Palazzo Loredan-Vendramin-Calergi, where Richard Wagner composed Parsifal and died. It is now the Municipal Casino."

"And it's a masterpiece of Renaissance architecture," said Peter. "You can tour it and, while you're there, try your luck at gambling. But we can't go with you, legally. An old statute still on the books forbids residents of Venice to enter the Municipal Casino. But we can ride by it on the vaporetto and see the Loredan family motto carved in stone on the waterside façade: NON NOBIS DOMINE NON NOBIS – "Praise us not, O Lord.' It's a declaration of humility by a very powerful family."

"The sign of the Loredan," said the count, "was inscribed in many places around Venice. It's at the Rialto and even carved into the façade of St. Mark's. This is very important! The basilica is a most prestigious place. But because of the corrosion from pigeon droppings, you can't see the Loredan insignia! It's a paradox. Squalid pigeons are the symbolic heroes of democracy! They are the heroic warriors in democracy's crusade to obliterate any vestige of historic nobility and grandeur."

Loredan raised an index finger. "I have written a book about democracy. It's called Democracy: A Fraud? Democracy disgusts me. It makes me sick!" He delivered this sentiment forcefully but without any lapse of affability. As he warmed to his topic, he abandoned English and was now speaking entirely in Italian.

"Do you know what democracy is based on? Numbers! But as everybody knows, when quantity increases, quality decreases. Democracies have a degrading base, because the quality only gets worse and worse. That is why democracies have inept leaders, elected at random. A far better course is to put government in the hands of an elite aristocracy— people who have inherited an aptitude for justice and good government from their noble ancestors. This is true. The best governments have always taken the form of monarchies and elite aristocracies. This has been confirmed historically, genetically, and biologically!"

"I take it," I said, "you are referring to such elite governments as that of the old Venetian Republic."

"Ecco! Exactly! The ruling patriarchy. There are very few of us left. The Barbarigo family is extinct. So are the Mocenigos. The Pisa-nis, who built this palace, have died out, too. So have the Grittis, the Dandolos, the Faliers, the Sagredos, and the Contarinis – eight of the hundred and twenty doges were Contarinis.

"What doges' families are left?"

"The Gradenigo family is still around— they are an old family, but not very important. And, let me see... the Verniers. And the Marcellos. You would find my book Nobility and Government inter-esting. I am now writing a book proving the existence of reality! It is already two thousand pages long."

A book on the subject of reality written by a Venetian had curious possibilities. Loredan seemed on the verge of explaining, but his wife was tugging at his sleeve.

"Well. another time," he said. "But I will send you a copy of my book explaining why democracy is a fraud." As he shuffled away, his wife tugging and smiling apologetically, he raised his hand as if to wave good-bye. Instead he held up three fingers. "Three!" he said. "Three doges!"

We started walking toward the tall windows on the Grand Canal. Rose pointed out a couple looking in our direction. The man was corpulent and had a head of untamed, wispy red hair and a broad, gap-toothed grin. The woman was dark-haired, lithe, and younger.

"That's Alistair and Romilly McAlpine," she said. "Alistair is very tight with Margaret Thatcher. He was treasurer of the Conservative Party when she was prime minister. He collects things. Serious things like paintings by Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, and less serious things like shepherds' crooks, rag dolls, and police truncheons—he's got about nine hundred truncheons by now, I think. Romilly has exquisite taste and a huge collection of Vivienne Westwood dresses. Anyway, the McAlpines aren't so much living in Venice as hiding out here, because their house in London was firebombed by the IRA, and they've had to— Romilly! Alistair!"