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## VENICE.

BY CHARLES J. PETERSON.



CORNER OF  
THE DUCAL PALACE.

**R**OGERS, the poet, said of Venice, two generations ago, that it seemed not a real city, but a city in a dream. Ruskin, thirty years later, used almost the same expression. And the description is as true to-day as it ever was. More than this: although volumes have been written on Venice, somehow the subject is always fresh.

The origin of Venice dates back to the seventh century of our era, when the inhabitants of Aquilia, then a thriving town on the mainland, sought refuge, from the hordes of Attila, among the low islands that lay off their coast. These islands were hardly more than sand-bars, thrown up by the rivers that emptied into the Adriatic. But they were not incapable of being made habitable, and they were at least safe from the ruthless barbarians, who had no boats in which to pursue the fugitives.

The first spot occupied was Torcello, about seven miles north of where Venice now stands.

The fugitives could plainly see from Torcello the burning towns and villages on the mainland, which the savage invaders had sacked and fired. At Torcello they built a church; and afterwards, quite a city grew up there. The church yet remains, but the city is no more. A solitary house or two; a basilica, with its campanile; the Byzantine Church of St. Foscò; and a few scattered ruins, are all that is left of a stately sea-port that once numbered many thousands of inhabitants, and contained no less than forty-three churches.

Soon after Torcello was settled, the islands further out to sea began to be occupied; and gradually Venice grew up on them, being even more favorably situated for commerce. In time the "mistress of the Adriatic," as she loved to be called, came to monopolize the entire trade of the East. Nor was it until the discovery of the route to India by the way of the Cape of Good Hope that she lost this maritime supremacy. For a thousand years, at least, Venice was the great trader of the world. Her unrivaled palaces were built not from the plunder of subjugated populations, as palaces were built in the North of Europe, but from the legitimate gains of trade. Before a foundation for these palaces could be secured, however, enormous piles had to be driven in; so that the city is, literally, built up out of the water. Where other towns have streets, Venice has only narrow arms of the sea, which, by a sort of misnomer, have come to be called canals. The door-steps of the state-liest mansions open not on a sidewalk, but on



BRIDGE OF THE RIALTO.

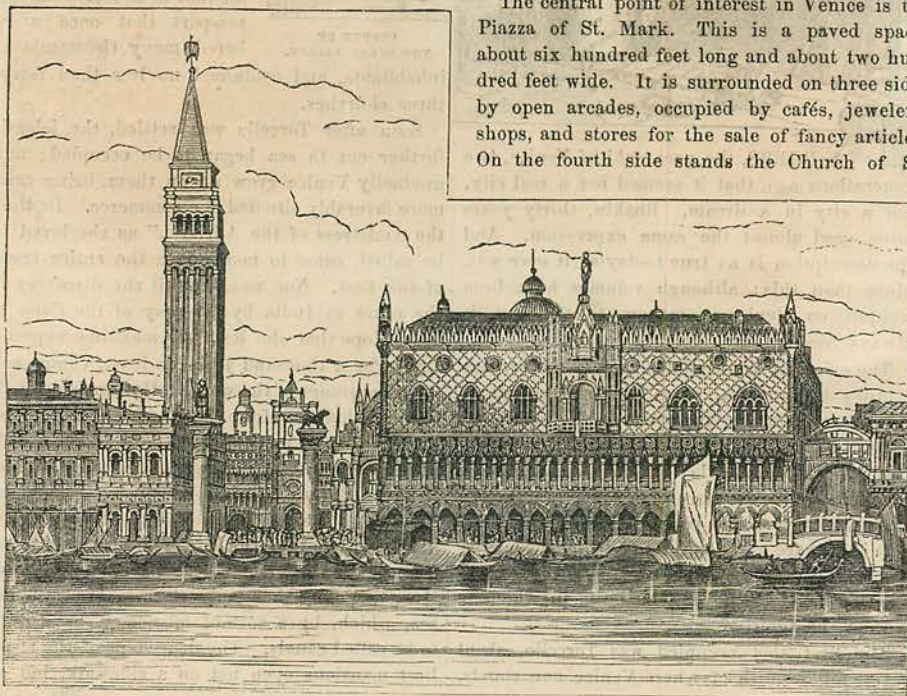
the water. A fine lady, on going out, steps not into her carriage, but into her gondola; and a rise of a dozen feet in the tide would submerge the lower floor of every house in the city.

My first visit to Venice was in 1866. It was on the eve of the war that soon after gave independence to her. Hostilities were so imminent, indeed, that when I left it was on the last train that was run before the road was seized by the Austrians for military purposes. I shall never forget the sullen looks of the Italians, as they

glared at the Hungarian sentinels who stood under the porches of the Ducal Palace, by the mouths of their cannon, the great guns loaded and pointing to the square. The day I left, the Count de Chambord, the Bourbon claimant of the French throne, who had been living at Venice, left also. I remember him at that time as a slightly portly, middle-sized and middle-aged gentleman, who walked with a limp, and who was affable even to good-fellowship, getting out at every halting-place to chat with the guards and other officials. He reminded me in this respect of what I had read of his great ancestor, Henry IV.

When I next went to Venice, it was several years later. Meantime, the city had become part of the new Italian Kingdom. One evening, during this visit, there was a *festa* on the Grand Canal, to celebrate this event. The water was alive with gondolas, decked out with colored lanterns. An enormous barge, larger even than the famous old Bucentaur, led the procession, with a band of music. Guitars and mandolins were heard from gondolas all around; and so, up and down the broad canal, with lights and melody and song, the gay fleet moved on. The moon was at the full, and the silver orb shone down from a cloudless sky. It was quite like a bit out of fairy-land.

The central point of interest in Venice is the Piazza of St. Mark. This is a paved space, about six hundred feet long and about two hundred feet wide. It is surrounded on three sides by open arcades, occupied by cafés, jewelers' shops, and stores for the sale of fancy articles. On the fourth side stands the Church of St.

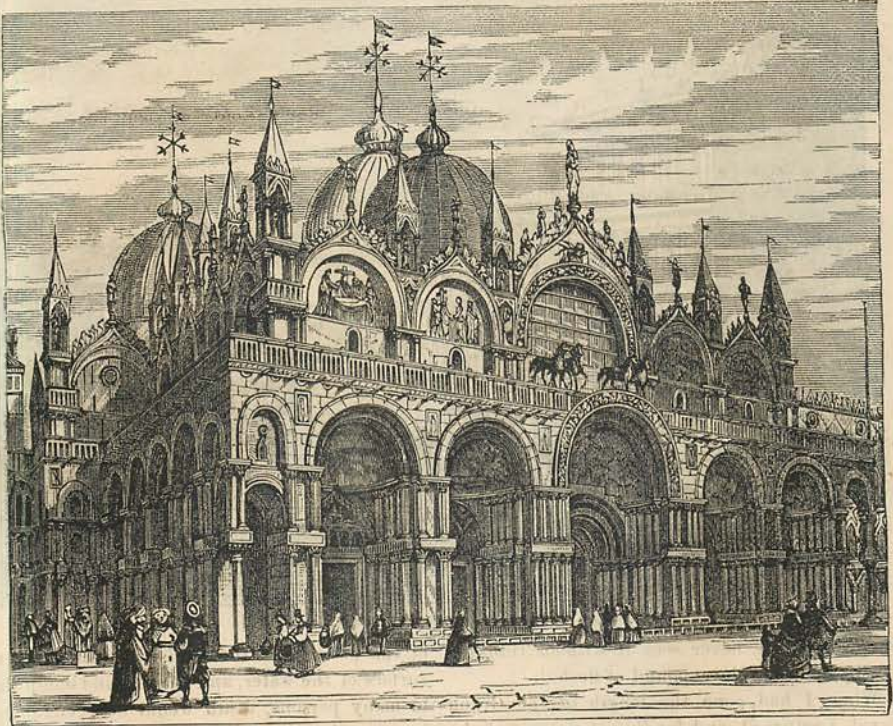


THE DUCAL PALACE, FROM THE WATER: AND BRIDGE OF SIGNS.

Mark. The southern side does not, however, quite go up to the cathedral, but makes way, near it, for a wide avenue that leads down, at right angles, to the Grand Canal. At this end stands the famous Campanile, and near it the great bronze sockets in which, in the palmy days of Venice, were placed the mighty staves from which floated the banners of the Republic. Here, also, are two ancient columns of granite, on one of which is the statue of St. Theodore, and on the other the winged lion of St. Mark. Every fine evening a band plays in the Piazza, which is thronged with the citizens, some eating

ices on the sidewalks, others promenading, but all as gay as only people of Latin blood can be.

I shall never forget my first morning at Venice, or my first visit to the Ducal Palace and St. Mark's. I had arrived late the night before, and gone to the Hotel Danieli, because it was within a few minutes' walk of St. Mark's. I had slept in a vast apartment, which, hundreds of years before, had been the bed-chamber of a Doge. His portrait, and that of his wife, had looked down on me from the walls. The glamor of the past, the magic of its poetry, was already on me, as it were, when I awoke. A



CATHEDRAL OF ST. MARK.

light haze hung over everything, as I looked forth from my window. But through the half obscurity I saw a sea like that of "faery or old romance;" mirage-like islands; ships that seemed as if they had just anchored from the Orient, and had still about them the flavor of spice groves; and white churches, with strange Byzantine domes, that loomed dimly through the fog, as if parts of some strange dream.

Nor did this dream-like aspect of things change even when I had breakfasted and taken a gondola, to make my first venture on the Grand Canal. The sun had dissolved the mists, it is true; but the strange unreality of every-

thing remained. When the oar of the gondolier dipped in the water, it seemed to make no sound. Other gondolas passed, but they glided by noiselessly, like black phantoms of boats. No stir of life was seen in the palaces on either hand. Silent and desolate they rose, like ghosts of a world dead and gone forever. Yet they were so beautiful, with their half Gothic, half Saracenic façades, that any one of them might have been the castle of the Sleeping Beauty herself.

These Venetian palaces are of all ages, some dating back to the eleventh century, and others having been built as late as the seventeenth. The earliest of them are altogether the most

picturesque. They can easily be recognized by their round-headed windows, evidently rude survivals of the style of the Roman Empire. Next in antiquity are the half Byzantine, half Arabic ones. After these come the more purely Gothic, the casements more or less *ogee* in shape, like those in the Casa Doro or the Palazzo Cavalli. Finally come the Renaissance, such as the Pesaro and Vandramini. Some have mo-

saics ornamenting their fronts. Among the most celebrated, in addition to those we have already mentioned, are the Cornari, the Guistiani, the Foscari, and the Gimini.

About half way down the Grand Canal is the bridge of the Rialto, familiar to everyone by a thousand engravings. This was the spot first settled in Venice, and around which the city gradually grew up. Shakespeare has made it



VIEW ON THE GRAND CANAL.

immortal. One never sees it without thinking of Shylock, and the "pound of flesh."

When I had gone the length of the Grand Canal, I returned, and landing at the foot of the Piazza of St. Mark, stopped at the Ducal Palace. This famous edifice has its southern front facing the Grand Canal, where it reaches as far as the Rio della Paglia, a narrow canal that opens out at right angles. It is across this little water-way, a short distance up, that the famous Bridge of Sighs, connecting the Ducal Palace with the State prisons on the other side, is thrown. The bridge is a covered one. In the old days, when Venice called herself a republic, though she was really only a narrow oligarchy, State prisoners were conducted across this gallery to hear their sentence, prior to being led to execution. Hence its name. Everyone will remember Byron's famous lines about it. Several

of the prison cells that I visited were below the surface of the water, and so dark and damp that, to many persons, death would be preferable to incarceration there.

The plan of the Ducal Palace is an irregular square, enclosing a court-yard. The southern façade looks out on the Grand Canal. Another looks westward, towards the avenue which, as we have already said, connects the Piazza of St. Mark with the water. Both sides are supported on double ranges of arches. The columns of the lower tier are partly buried in the pavement, for in the five centuries since their erection the land has sunk about fifteen inches.

There are numerous superb rooms in this palace, many of them former State apartments, decorated with frescoes by the great artists of Venice. In the court-yard are two finely-sculptured bronze well-coverings, surmounting cis-

terns, both designed in the sixteenth century. At the northeast angle of the court-yard is the Giant's Staircase, celebrated as that where the Doge, Mario Falieri, was decapitated. This Doge had been detected in a conspiracy to suppress the Republic and make himself dictator, if not king. He was beheaded on the platform at the top of the stairs, and tradition says that the severed head afterwards rolled down to the foot

of the steps. In the great Council Hall, one of the most magnificent rooms in the Ducal Palace, are the portraits of the Doges, seventy-two in number. But that of Mario Falieri is empty, and on a scroll is written in Latin: "This is the place of Mario Falieri, beheaded for his crimes."

Leaving the Ducal Palace, I passed on to St. Mark's, which abuts upon it. I had read all



THE CASA DORO PALACE.

that Ruskin had written about this wonderful church, but was hardly prepared, notwithstanding, for the splendors I saw. St. Mark's, indeed, is like nothing else in the known world. There it stood, with its mosque-like domes; with the famous group of bronze horses that had once ornamented the hippodrome of Constantinople; with the five great portals; and with that im-

mortal mosaic, hundreds of years old, from which Christ looks down and blesses "the poor in heart" forever. A step took me into the vestibule, through one of the five great doors of bronze. Overhead, in a blaze of gold, also in mosaic, were prophets, saints, and martyrs: St. Mark, the other Evangelists, and angels innumerable. Before me was a door that had been

brought from St. Sophia in 1205. I crossed the threshold, and entered the church proper. Porphyry, jasper, serpentine, verd-antique, alabaster, were on every side; spoils from heathen temples in Asia, from Antioch and Acre; gifts from Byzantium, and even from Jerusalem itself. What splendors of mosaic! What magnificence of color! What an array of sculptured monuments! Yet, as I walked on in the direction

of the high altar, I could not help seeing that this magnificent church, like the Ducal Palace next door, was slowly settling into the sea; for the floor under foot was as uneven as a lake that is ruffled by a wind, and cracks were visible everywhere in the domes, and even in their supports. The time cannot be far remote, unless means are taken to prevent it, when St. Mark's, with its memories of more than a thousand



MOONLIGHT ON THE LAGOONS.

years, will sink into the deep, and the waters wash over it as they do over its rival of the ancient world—desolate, forgotten Tyre.

There is one curious custom in Venice, that is said to be centuries old. It is the feeding the pigeons, in St. Mark's Piazza, at noonday. By long custom the birds have come to know their privilege and their immunity. Before the great clock near St. Mark's begins to strike twelve, not a pigeon is to be seen. But no sooner does the first blow resound from the giant's hammer, than the birds begin to flutter down, at first in pairs, then in dozens, then by hundreds. By the time the last stroke of twelve has died away, while yet it is echoing and re-echoing, the pavement is alive with them. It is the habit of travelers to resort to the Piazza at this hour, to throw crumbs of bread to the pigeons; and the memory of this noonday experience is one of the pleasantest that the "forestieri" carry away with them.

The palaces of Venice are not all on the Grand Canal. A perfect network of smaller waterways threads the city, and on almost every one of these, however narrow, you see palaces. Sometimes, as you lie back on the cushions of your gondola, lost in reverie, you are startled by the sharp warning cry of your gondolier, and find yourself being whirled around a sudden turn into a side canal, and under the most picturesque of corner balconies. At other times you land where some tiny open space gives you a few feet to walk on, and passing into a courtyard, come upon a *casa* that was old before Marco Polo traveled into "far Cathay." Everywhere you see churches—some of them exquisitely beautiful. The Church of the Frari, that of Santa Giovanni and Paoli, that of San Giorgio Maggiore, that of Santa Maria della Salute, and a dozen others, are the most interesting. In the Academy of Fine Arts is a very fine collection of pictures, by Titian, Tin-

toretto, Paul Veronese, and different native artists; and nowhere, bye-the-bye, do you see Tinterettos or Veroneses in such perfection as you do at Venice.

The excursions in the vicinity of Venice are all picturesque, and are, of course, all by water. One of the first you make is to the Armenian Convent, which lies a few miles to the south of Venice. It was here that Byron studied with the monks. A few miles still further to the south is the Lido, a narrow strip of land that separates Venice and its surrounding islands from the open gulf. Here the Venetians resort for sea-bathing, in the sultry months of summer. To the north of Venice lies Torcello, of which we have already spoken; and half way between the two, Murano, famous for its glass-works. It was here that the glass was made that was so much sought after two or three centuries ago, and pieces of which now, when perfect, bring such fabulous prices from connoisseurs. Within the last generation, the art has been revived, and is now carried on quite successfully again.

The lagoons are so shallow, that when the tide is out a large portion of them becomes bare. But when the tide is in, you see a wide waste of water, with only a few islands here and there, on which are low white buildings, occasional campaniles, and long rows of black cypresses. By a curious optical illusion, these islands do not appear to lie on the surface of the water, but to float in the air, just above it. The water itself is like no other water. It is clear and translucent, but of ever shifting hues; now aqua-marine, now malachite, now opalescent. Sometimes, by moonlight, the effect out on the lagoons is inexpressibly weird. You seem, as your gondola steals along, to be in a land of eld.

I recall many excursions; but particularly one: on the day we went to Torcello. The afternoon was far spent, before we could tear ourselves away from the curious old church and campanile. By the time we were abreast of Murano, on our way back, the sun was setting, bringing out the long line of

hills on the mainland, to the northwest, in silhouettes of intense black. Before us, far away, vague and indistinct, lay the city. It was so vague, indeed, that at first we might have thought it a fog-bank, but for a sparkle of red light that broke from it, here and there, where the sunset lit up the upper window of some lofty palace. As we drew nearer, however, the gloom lifted. The undistinguishable mass began to assume shape. First appeared the long line of white buildings fringing the water. Then came the red-tiled roofs of the houses. Next, the domes of the churches. Lastly, rising over all, the tall campaniles, like black fountains shooting up into the sky. As the twilight deepened, lights began to glimmer all along the city front. They shot down and out, reflected in the still water. The buildings behind seemed to rise: to float in the air; we floated with them; and the enchanted islands all around us rose and floated, too.

Even when we reached our hotel, the illusion could hardly be shaken off: we were still, as it were, living in a dream, in a land of dreams.



FEEDING THE PIGEONS.