

Venice and Torcello.

Perhaps it is the very strangeness and completeness of the contrast which makes one's first row from Venice to Torcello so hard to forget. Behind the great city sinks slowly into a low line of domes and towers, around dotted here and there over the gleaming surface are the orange sails of trading market boats, we skirt the great hay-barns and marble, whose boatmen bawly brag and bludge with our gondolier, we glide by a lonely press into a broader reach, and before us spreads a waste of brown sedge and brushwood, the tower of Torcello rises sharply against the sky. There is something weird and unearthly in the suddenness with which we pass from the bright, luminous waters of the lagoon, barred with softness of violet light, and broken with reflections of wall and bell-tower, into this scene of desolation and death. A whole world seems to part those dreary flats broken lifeless inlets, those patches of sodden silt flung shapelessly among sheets of sullen water. From the life and joy of the Grand Canal, and yet, really to understand the origin of Venice, those ages of terror and night and exile in which the republic took its birth, we must study them at Torcello. It was from the vast Alpine chain which hangs in the haze of midday like a long dim outline to the north, that the hordes of Hun and Goth burst on the Roman world, their path lay along the coast trending round the west, where, lost among the little islets that stand out white in the disadawning, lie the sites of Heraclea Altinum. Across these grey shallows cut by the blue serpentine windings of the channels the Romans of the older Italia fled before Attila or Theodorice or to found a new Eastward over the plumes of the Piratae that struggle for centuries of the Pirate's life which shaped into their after-form the ornament and destinies of Venice. Venice, if the crown and end of struggle and of lies over shining miles of sea to the north. But it is here that one can best study the story of its birth; it is easier to realize the centuries of exile and buffeting for life in the dreary flats, the solitude, the poverty Torcello than beneath the gleaming front the Ducal Palace or the mosaics of St. Mark.

ages which followed this original form of Venetian society remained unchanged. The populace of dependants may have grown into a people. To the fisherman and gondolier cling to the great houses of which they were the clients, as the fishes of Torcello cling to the great nobles of Altinum. No difference of tradition or language or blood parted them. Tradition, on the contrary, bound them together. No democratic agitator could appeal from the present to the past, as Rienzi invoked the memories of the Tribune against the feudal tyranny of the Colonas. In Venice the past and present were one. The patrician of Altinum simply governed the State as his fathers, the counts of Padua or Aquileia, had governed the State ten centuries before him. Elsewhere the history of medieval Italy had sprung from the difference in race and tradition between conquered and conqueror, between Lombard noble and Italian serf. The communal revolt of the twelfth century, the democratic constitutions of Milan or of Bologna, were in effect a rising of race against race, the awaking of a new people in the effort to throw off the yoke of the stranger. The huge embattled piles which hung their dark shadows over the streets of Florence tell of the ceaseless war between baronage and people. The famous penalty by which some of the democratic communes condemned a recreant noble or a traitor to "descend" as his worst punishment "into the order of the noblesse," tells of the hate and issue of the struggle between them. But no trace of struggle or of hate breaks the annals of Venice. There is no people, no democratic Broletto, no Hall of the Commune. The palaces of Torcello or Rialto were houses not of war, but of peace; no dark masses of tower and wall, but bright with marbles and frescoes, and broken with arcades of fretted masonry.

In a word, Venice to her very close was a city of nobles, the one place in the modern world where the old senatorial houses of the fifth century lived and ruled as of old. But it was a city of Roman nobles. The Teutonic passion for war and scorn of commerce was strange and unknown to the curial houses of the Italian municipalities, as it had been to the strange and unknown to the greatest houses of Rome. The Senator of Padua or Aquileia, of Concordia, Altinum, or Ravenna, had always been a merchant, and in his new refuge he remained a merchant still. Venice was no "crowd of poor fishermen," as it has been sometimes described, who were gradually drawn to wider ventures and a larger commerce. The port of Aquileia had long been the emporium of a trade which reached northward to the Danube and eastward to Byzantium. What its merchants had been at Aquileia they remained at Grado. The commerce of Altinum simply transferred itself to Torcello. The Roman patrician passed to their old port of Grado, and rhetorical as is the letter of Claudian, it shows how keen was the mercantile activity of the State from its beginning. Nothing could be more natural, more continuous in its historical development; nothing was more startling, more incomprehensible to the new world which has grown up in barbaric moulds. The nobles of Henry VIII's Court could not restrain their sneer at "the fishermen of Venice," the stately patricians who could look back from merchant-noble to merchant-noble through ages when the mushroom houses of England were unheard of. Only the genius of Shakespeare seized the grandeur of a social organization which was still one with that of Rome, and Athens, and Tyre. The merchant of Venice is with him "a royal merchant." His "argosies o'er top the petty traffickers." At the moment when feudalism was about to vanish away, the poet comprehended the grandeur of that commerce which it scorned, and the grandeur of the one State which had carried the nobler classic tradition across ages of brutality and ignorance. The great commercial State, whose merchants are nobles, whose nobles are Romans, rises in all its majesty before us in the Merchant of Venice.

Treason Under Henry VIII. The Exeter Gazette gives us a curious story, gleaned from the mass of MSS. in the Guildhall which Mr. Stuart Moore has lately been engaged in calendaring. The old histories of Exeter by Isaacks and Jenkins mention the catastrophe which forms the climax of the story, but without tracing the "secret history" which led up to it, and which affords a noticeable illustration of social life in a provincial capital during the reign of Henry VIII. On the 10th of August, 1539, one John Bonenfant, an Exeter attorney, was hanged and quartered on Southbarry for high treason. From the crabb'd old record now deciphered, it seems that Bonenfant and two familiar friends, John Northbrook and Adam Wilcocks, a proctor, had been supping together one evening at a house partly belonging to Northbrook, but in which Bonenfant had certain real rights pre-emptive to Northbrook's interests. Apparently none of the three were admirers of King Henry's rule, for after some talk about the times they "fell into discoursing of prophecies, of which one was that the *molle varpe* should come accursed of God's mouth, and vengeance should befall him." The other was a Welsh prophecy about great things happening on the conjunction of a dun cow and a bull. All this the gossips came to the conclusion had reference to the king and his destined destruction, and having settled the matter in their own minds, merely as a matter of innocent speculation, they burned the paper which had the prophecies written on it, and broke up their symposium. But into Northbrook's mind came evil thoughts. Says he to Wilcocks, "It is high treason against the king's person which we have talked all this night at my house, and therefore we must look to ourselves that we be not in danger for the same for you know," said he, "that Mr. Bonenfant was a lawyer and a crafty man, and knoweth what belongeth to the law, and if he should secretly go to Mr. Mayor, and disclose what we have talked, and accuse us, it will cost our lives. Wherefore, let us prevent him, and play sure, and go to Mr. Mayor and first accuse him, and so shall we save ourselves."

This was accordingly the line these amiable friends pursued, and Northbrook added some super-refined villainy by pretending to warn Bonenfant of danger impending over him, and enticing him into a house where he had arranged that the officers of the law should find him. Information was sent to Government, a commission of inquiry into the alleged treason was instituted, and addressed the Mayor and Sir Richard Pollard, and Bonenfant was beheld, as aforesaid, the principal charge specified against him being "that he should say the king was a *molle varpe*, and that he (the king) should subvert the state of the realm," etc. The infamous delators were not happy in their end. "Adam Wilcocks fell accused and was distracted of his wits; his tongue rolled in his head, and he died most miserably. Northbrook had Bonenfant's house which he sought for, and lived in great infamy all the days of his life, and his issues had bad success."

The story is told very graphically and at some length by John Hooker, the old Guildhall chronicler. Perhaps the most noteworthy point in it is the allusion to the *molle varpe*, of the *molle varpe*, of which we have mentioned, it will be remembered, in Shakespeare's *Henry IV. Part I. Act III. Scene 1.* "Hotspur" says, "He angers me with telling me of the *molle varpe* and the ant, of the dreamer Merlin and his prophecies." But the passage which the Exeter gossips had in their mind was probably that in Holinshed, where, referring to the proposed division of England between Glendower and his allies, he says, "This was done (as some have said) through a foolish credit given to a vain prophecy, as though King Henry was the *molle varpe* cursed of God's own mouth," etc. The *molle varpe* or *molle varpe* is the mole, so called because it warps, or makes crooked, the face of the earth above it. Poor Bonenfant was only venturing on a double interpretation of the prophecy by projecting it onwards from Henry IV to Henry VIII, who had just been suppressing the monasteries, and so forth.

**Grisi's Repertoire.** During the late Madame Grisi's London operatic career, extending over a period of twenty-seven seasons, she sang some 925 nights. Here is a chronological list of the operas in which the greatest singer has appeared, with the number of times she appeared in each before a London audience: "La Gazza Ladra," 47; "Anna Bolena," 42; "Otello," 36; "Il Don Giovanni," 34; "La Donna del Lago," 31; "L'Assedio di Corinto," 11; "Semiramide," 41; "Il Barbiere," 38; "La Sonnambula," 18; "Marino Faliero," 8; "I Puritani," 92; "Prova d'un Opera Seria," 21; "Norma," 79; "I Briganti," 21; "Il Matrimonio Segreto," as Caroline, 10; as Lisetta, 2; "Malek Adal," 7; "Hedegarda," 2; "Parisina," 6; "Nozze di Figaro," 21; "Falstaff," 4; "Lucrezia Borgia," 100; "Il Giuramento," 9; "Faust," 2; "Roberto Devereux," 6; "Don Pasquale," 29; "Cenerentola," 3; "Don Carlos," 5; "Corrado d'Altamura," 1; "Il Pirata," 1; "I Lombardi," 11; "I due Foscari," 3; "La Favorita," 2; "Les Hugenots," 84; "Roberto il Diavolo," 12; "Il Barba Magico," 3; "Le Prophete," 9; "Il Trovatore," 16. The prima donna's performances may be distributed among thirteen composers, thus:—In operas by Donizetti, she appeared on 218 nights; by Rossini, 197; by Bellini, 105; by Mozart, 108; by Meyerbeer, 105; by Verdi, 30; by Mercadante, 14; by Costa, 12; in an opera by Gaecco she appeared on 21 occasions; by Cimarosa, 19; by Balfe, 4; by Martini, 2; and by Ricci, once only.