

Venice and the Venitians.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY.

By Rev. L. M. Collett D. D.

From Milan to Venice is a journey of several hundred miles through the lowlands of Lombardy, a very fertile region abounding in ditches and surface water. Among the principal crops of this region, we would be tempted to place the fever and ague. The whole country is a mulberry orchard with grapes festooned from tree to tree, high up from the ground. The mulberry furnishes the silk worm with their food, the interspaces are planted with corn and the grape comes in at the end, never properly nourished and deprived of the sugar-producing action of the sun. This is the occasion of the wretched wine of Italy. The ecstasies of Horace over the "mild Falernian" were mainly poetical, we fear. The Greek hostages spoke more precisely the prose of the matter when they remarked in derision of the Roman wine "that the grapes that made such wines ought to be lifted up to the skies." The modern traveler agrees with the Greek hostages for he drinks the thin, sour beverage only at thirstiest need. Very picturesque, however, is this habit of trailing the vines from tree to tree, especially in late autumn when their foliage is all golden and russet with dashes of crimson. The pollarded mulberries, linked with the many colored festoons, backed by lakes of emerald green, or forest clad hillsides in the golden splendor of their most brilliant change, all bathed in the mellow brightness of an Italian sky, furnish the traveler a fascination difficult to forget.

After some hours the change from the hard and sonorous to the softer more sullen rumble of the railway carriage indicates that we are traversing the famous Lagoons which border the Adriatic Gulf and diffuse an unwholesome atmosphere. It is night when we reach the end of our journey and begin at last to behold, as in a half-darkened mirror, the fantastic outlines of the city of Venice, here and there illumined by pale lights and rising from the water like a floating caravan or mirage of the deep. Truly the night with its uncertain vision and fitful shadows is the time above all others to enter this city of enchantment, whose chiefest glory now consists in its power to excite the imagination. To the stranger, ignorant of the 117 islands on which the city of more than one hundred thousand is built, Venice does indeed appear a floating city, poised upon the surface of the water and presided over by some sprite of the waves. The train having stopped, we immediately discover that all the conditions of ordinary life belonging to other cities are changed in Venice. No crowd of vehicles nor rush of yelling hotel derisives await you. Instead there is a long row of black gondolas lying at the bottom of the marble steps. The formality of securing one of these and entering with your luggage is conducted with a quietude which seems to indicate that there is no power even in steam to break in with hoarse energy upon the tranquility of a city whose streets echo with no sounds save those of the wavelets which the blue Adriatic wafts through her canals.

We find the Venetian gondola, the object of so much curiosity on our part, to be a most melancholy craft. An ellipse of black wood, swan shaped with many reliefs, at one of the extremities a great halboard cut deeply, with teeth whose steel shimmers ominously and at the other end a species of twisted tail, in the center a place of repose lined inside with black cloth and silk embroidery and shaded with dark curtains—this is the gondola. On entering the ill-lighted boat it was not difficult to imagine that we were in a floating hearse and were being drawn through a city of the dead, an illusion heightened by the imperceptible movement of the boat, the night gloom, the desolate palaces, the half-ruined windows, the low and shadowy arches and the murmur of the waters as they splash against the broken marble steps, like tears falling on tears. The craft is a fit companion of the adventure and romance. We understand now, more vividly than ever before, Shakespeare's "Moor and Merchant of Venice," Victor Hugo's "Angelo" and the dramas of Byron. They were cradled in the mysterious shadows of these gondolas. From the station to the hotel in the Square of St. Mark, seemed a long distance and impatient of the low, ill-lighted saloon, we emerge and stand erect to gain a better view of this strange and unique city. We feel that the boatman at the extreme end of the craft and handling his single oar might be Sharon and these the waters of the Styx, so sombre and bituminous are they and so prevalent is the sentiment of gloom. The streets of water are unlighted save by the dull lamps of the gondola passing so silently by the high walls of dull buildings which but deepen the darkness of the night. It is as if the city was without inhabitants. Over the arches of the bridges living beings do indeed occasionally pass but it is not difficult to imagine them to be unreal and but strange reflections caused by the vapors of the air. The silence is broken only by the ripple of the oar or the cry of the gondolier, sharp and shrill as the note of a wild sea-bird, which warns at every corner his fellow craftsmen in order to prevent a collision.

At length we emerge from the tortuous labyrinth of narrow waterways and enter the Grand Canal where by the light of the stars we gaze with astonishment upon a succession of palaces, shafts of twisted columns, the plinths and pedestals, the Gothic roses and arabesque windows which mount above the waters. Soon, however, the gondola is lost again amid the narrow streets and all the beautiful decorations disappear from our view, while

we are involved in a mental study as to how the gondolier, balancing himself on the furthest edge of the long boat and using only one long oar on one side, could manage to guide his craft with such precision as to glide safely by the passing boat or avoid by a hair's breadth the jutting bridges and the corners of stone. These gondolieri form a distinct population but they are no longer gay sailors singing Venetian airs and reciting the verses of Tasso. The deflection of the strain of human migration toward America has ruined the prosperity of Venice and turned life into a hard and bitter struggle. That struggle has been rendered desperate by the introduction of steam vessels upon the Grand Canal. Political economy is ruthless. What protest of special class of craftsmen has ever availed to stem the general progress or undo the incidental fatality. We fear the gondoliers will find it an unequal struggle and like the dwellers of the land must soon be improved off the face of the waters. The gondolier descends from a line of ancestors as long as the dilapidated Patricians but is a nobler character. His whole fortune is in his boat which is perhaps worth two hundred dollars. Every day he must be at his post and every third night. During the summer months he gains about one dollar a day, in the winter almost nothing. The food of the family, when they have food, is a handful of fish, a little rice and polenta or maize. Yet these men who would be supposed according to the notions of an Ameri-

can laborer to starve, are hardy, strong and muscular and can row for many hours without apparent effort. Over against these gondoliers toiling night and day for the luxury of living on polenta, are the descendants of the Patricians who would rather die than soil their hands with labor, who occupy palaces unable to bear the expense of living save in a few rooms. While all other Venetians of any prominence are seeking to bring back the prosperity of the city, while humble citizens work hard for a pittance, these youths in large numbers, who regard themselves as the salt of the earth simply because they are the sons of the Patricians, these noble drones vegetate on easy chairs in the Square of San Marco, expending for the privilege and coffee, two and one-half pence a day, and enjoy all the excitement and none of the exertion of speculative commerce in the adventure of a lira in the National Lottery. These human lizards, crowding the chairs in front of the cafes, are well satisfied with an existence that one would think would drive a snail to commit suicide. Infinitely superior to these creatures, who think to do nothing from the first day to the last of the year is perfect bliss, were the gondolieri, not merely in physical, but in mental and moral manhood.

There was, however, one serious and dreadful malady to which they were subject, viz: Madness. A congress of doctors investigated the symptoms to determine whether the loss of their wits was owing to the

use of polenta. The conclusion was that good well-cooked cornmeal is a wholesome food but that diseases arise from eating maize grown from exhausted land, from being milked by dampness and from being badly cooked. Whatever the cause, on one of the islands near the town, Venice had confined six hundred lunatics, all supposed to have owed their condition to eating Indian corn.

Shall we ever forget our first night in the city of Venice and its almost preternatural quietude. The next morning in the reading room of the hotel, as if by strange coincidence, we hit upon an old number of the Saturday Review in which was an article on "Noises" and the following sentence: "If we could only popularize the idea that noise is injurious to health and that, in fact it disintegrates the tissues, we might get this subject attended to and there would be some chance of the intelligent co-operation necessary for the taking of measures to diminish noise." Ah! thought we, Venice is the delectable city for which this philosopher of ease and conservator of tissues is sighing. For nervous folk and all who have grown too sensitive to endure cheerfully the noises of civilization we recommend a residence in this city of silence. No nerve shattering street-cars every three minutes of day and night! No street of Venice has ever resounded with the tread of horse. No engine whistles piercing the ears, no dangerous sound of bells. Bells there are, but Ah! strangely mellowed and

sweet voiced are they as they bring to our ears the Angelus, and remind us of the emotion of Byron, when one evening he fancied he heard the combination of these same echoes from the borders of the horizon gliding over the waters as the stars of Heaven to the Mother of Christ with the moon at her feet and with the mysterious white dove waving its wings on her forehead, in that sublime hour of Catholic respect and devotion.

How Beavers Handle Trees.

A beaver needs bark for food and timber for building his house, and he is the greatest "logger" among the lower animals. You probably are familiar with his dam-building talents, but he is equally clever and efficient in the forest.

At tree-felling each beaver works independently. A small tree is cut through from one side, but a larger one usually on two sides or all around, the chips being split out much as by a woodman's axe.

The common impression is that only small saplings are cut down by beavers, but this is a mistake: trees three feet in diameter are sometimes felled—and in workmanlike style, too.

The small tree offers no problem at all. A big one may keep a family of beavers busy for several nights, but a single experienced beaver can fell a four-inch poplar, chop it into five-foot sections, and transport the whole tree to the water in a single night.

It's a sight worth seeing to watch

a beaver take a log over the ground to the lake or stream. He grabs it with those wonderful teeth and drags with a strength that is positively astounding. In the water he tows it, or sometimes grips it with his arms, swimming alongside, and steering with his broad, agile tail.

I have seen a beaver go to the pond bottom, reappear with all the sticks he could hold in his arms, and walk upright on his hind legs to the top of his house. They have not only brains to think, but the strength and suppleness to execute their plans.

When he has a choice, the beaver will nearly always select the aspen. The bark of poplar, willow, alder and birch is acceptable, but aspen bark is the preference.—"Our Dumb Animals."

100 Eagles Attack Flock of Sheep, Kill Forty-two.

Moscow.—A great flock of mountain eagles, darkening the sky, swooped down on the meadows of the Dagestan republic and killed forty-two sheep in one mass attack, according to word received by the Soviet commissary of agriculture. The terrified shepherds, accustomed to beating off the attacks of single eagles, fled when the big birds descended on their flocks in mass formation. It was estimated that at least 100 eagles participated in the raid from the sky.

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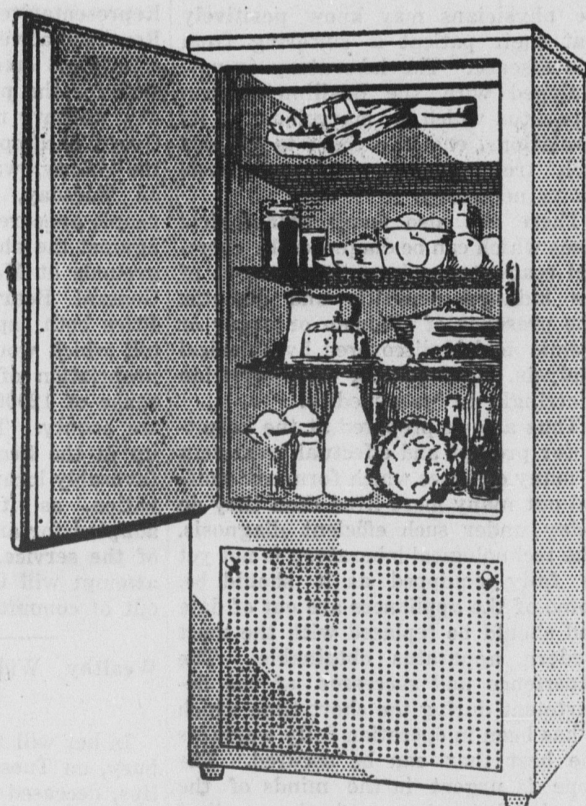
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