

HOW VENICE IS BEING DEFENDED

Before Menace of Modern Hun, Lagoons To-day Are Practically Emptied

With the French Army in Italy. Before the menace of the modern Hun, Venice, whose lagoons centuries ago furnished an asylum of safety for refugees fleeing from Attila, is to-day almost emptied. Of the 150,000 persons who ordinarily inhabit the city, only about 1,000 remain. But this is not because Venice fears for her own protection. Across the battlefield of the reeds it is believed that no invader will penetrate to the islands of the Venetian lagoon. The city puts her trust in the lagoons as confidently as she trusted to the sea in olden times.

To the visitor in Venice these days when the invading army lies only a short march distant, one of the odd memories of the war will be that of the music of the great guns booming from Lidi and the nests of reedy islets in the northern lagoon. That accompaniment you all day in Venice.

The Queen of the Adriatic has her face to the foe. She has shut her shops and sent her merchandise away. The army or the navy have taken her young men. Those that remain have bricked up or sand-bagged her churches and monuments and now await the issue in entire calm, confident that, although the enemy is no more than a long gun shot away, it is not at her own gates that Venice is menaced.

From Burano, a motorboat takes you through a maze of channels into the canal Silone, where you thread your way between reed-covered banks toward the mainland. You can see nothing but the channel and the reeds. There is not a roof nor a spire in sight. We are getting up to what may be called the artillery defense line of Venice. On the way we passed a British monitor with her big guns pointed inland. The coast batteries and big gun monitors constitute another defense line. Here in the salt channel between the islands we come suddenly upon a floating battery or pontoon, as the Italians call it. It is a big steel barge mounting a gun which has been steadily pounding the Austrians on the Piave Vecchia all night. She is manned by sailors, for the artillery defense of Venice is entirely in the hands of the navy.

From Porto Grandi, as far as the eye can see the land is covered with a waste of muddy water, two rows of half-submerged willows marking out the fields which it covers, and here and there an isolated clump of farm buildings emerging from the floods. We are here on the edge of the Piave inundations and in another naval artillery defense belt. High-banked roads, dikes and farm houses are all that remain above water. Some of these farm house islands are held by Austrians and some by Italians, and it is the aim of both sides to destroy the farms held by the enemy. A few nights ago some Italian sailors undertook a cutting out expedition against one of the Austrian islands, captured and burned the buildings and came back with Austrian prisoners.

Nothing more dismal can be imagined than this battlefield among the reeds, except the awful desolation of the Flanders front. Unending water, half-drowned willows and farm houses under a bitter winter sky compose about as melancholy a picture as even war presents. On many of the islands formed by the release of the floods to protect Venice are brave families clinging to their homes in the hope that 1918 will see the invader thrown back.

On this sector the Italians have a superiority of artillery. It is at night that the Italian guns do their hardest work. At night the Austrians always attempt to construct field works or to lay bridges of boats across the Piave Vecchia to the canal. They take a number of boats, tie them together and swing them out from one bank, trusting to the current to float them into place on the other side. It is the business of the Italian floating batteries to drive away these bridge-builders and to destroy the fruits of their labors, and this they do with surprising success.

In Venice, herself, I have seen no sign of actual damage, except a hole torn in the roof of San Giovanni and San Paolo by an Austrian airplane bomb. The front of San Marco and the pillars of the Doge's Palace have been bricked up so that nothing of them remains visible. The same precautions have been taken with the famous statue of Colleoni and, in fact, with all the monuments of the town that can be so protected. In the Piazza di San Marco almost all the shops are closed, but a number are still open in the Mercoria, and, although almost all the gondolas have vanished, it is possible to find one to take you up the Grand Canal.

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