

## A SEARCH FOR OLD LACE IN VENICE.

ONE is almost ashamed to mention Venice now, or any other of those thousand-and-one bournes of hackneyed travel and staples of hackneyed books. There is probably no one claiming a place in a civilized community who does not know Venice almost as well as do her own children, and who could not discourse intelligently of the Bridge of Sighs, the Doge's Palace, and the Rialto Bridge, of St. Mark's and the brazen horses. Still, when one has read multitudinous poems about gondolas and gondoliers, and any amount of descriptions of the Grand Canal, with its palaces of various styles of architecture, and some few dramas about the grand and gloomy, the secret and awful, doings of ancient Venetian life, even then there are nooks in the place and incidents in the doings which escape notice. A traveller arriving at Venice is hardly surprised at the water-street, with which pictures have already made him familiar, but the mode of entering a covered gondola—crab-fashion—is not so familiar, and he generally butts his head against the low ceiling, eliciting a laugh from his gondolier and the good-humored bystanders, before he learns the native and proper way of backing into his seat. So, too, in rowing slowly and dreamily about from church to church, full of artistic marvels or wonderful historical monuments, he feels to a certain degree at home. He has seen all this before; the present is but a dream realized. But there are now and then unexpected sights—though, it must be confessed, not many—and of course such are the most interesting, even

if they are by no means on a level with those more famous and more beautiful.

From Venice to Vicenza is but a short distance by rail, and Vicenza boasts of Roman ruins, and mediæval churches, and a Palladian theatre; but on our day's trip there, in early spring, we certainly dwelt more on the aspect of the woods and plains, with their faint veil of yellow green already beginning to appear, the few flowers in the *osteria* garden, and the box hedges and aloes in the cemetery. The beauty of the Venetian and Lombard plains lies more in their mere freshness than in their diversity; it is entirely a beauty of detail, a beauty fit for the minuteness of Preraphaelite art rather than for the sweeping brush of the great masters of conventional landscape painting. But coming from Venice every trace of verdure was grateful to the eye, and we felt as one who, having been confined in a beautiful, spacious room, filled with treasures and scented with subtle perfume, might feel on coming suddenly into the fresh air of a prairie. By contrast, the suggestion of fresh air and open space draws us at once to our subject—a search after old lace in one of the cities known to possess many treasures in that line.

Like all other industries in Venice, the sale of lace thrives chiefly on the fancy of the foreign visitors. The natives are generally too poor to buy much of it, and, indeed, much of what is in the market is the product of forced sacrifices made by noble but impoverished families of Venetian origin. It is a

sad thing to see the spoils of Italy still scattered over the world, as if the same fate had pursued her, with a few glorious intervals of triumph and possession, ever since the barbarian ancestors of her *forestieri* rifled her treasure-houses under the banners of Celtic, Cimbrian, and Gothic chieftains. What Brennus, Alaric, and Genseric began the Constable of Bourbon and the great Napoleon continued by force; but what is still sadder is to see the daily disintegration of other treasure-houses whose contents are unwillingly but necessarily bartered away to rich Englishmen, Americans, and Russians. Pictures, jewelry, lace, goldsmith's work, artistic trifles—precious through their material and history, but more so through the family associations which have made them heirlooms—too often pass from the sleepy, denuded, dilapidated, but still beautiful Italian palace to the cabinet or gallery or museum of the lucky foreign connoisseur, or even—a worse fate—into the hands of men to whom possession is much, but appreciation very little.

While at Venice we were so lazy as never to go sight-seeing, which accounts for the fact that we missed many a thing which visitors of a few days see and talk learnedly about; and if the business activity of an old lace-seller had not brought her to the hotel, our search after lace might never have been made. She brought fine specimens with her, but her prices were rather high, and, after admiring the lace, she was dismissed without getting any orders. But she came again, and this time left her address. We wanted some lace for a present, and fancied that the proverbial facility for taking anything rather than nothing, which

distinguishes the Italian seller of curiosities, would induce her to strike some more favorable bargain in her own house, where no other customer would be at hand to treasure up her weakness as a precedent.

It was not easy to find the house. Many intricate little canals had to be traversed (for on foot we should probably have lost our way over and over again); and as we passed, many a quaint court, many a delicate window, many a sombre archway, and as often the objects which we, perhaps too conventionally, call picturesque—such as the tattered clothes drying on long lines stretched from window to window; heaps of refuse piled up against princely gateways; rotten posts standing up out of the water, with the remnants of the last coat of paint they ever had, a hundred years ago; gaudy little shrines calculated to make a Venetian *popolana* feel very pious and an "unregenerate" artist well-nigh frantic—met our sight. At last the house was reached, or at least the narrow quay from which a *calle*, or tiny, dark street, plunged away into regions unknown but inviting. Our gondolier was wise in the street-labyrinth lore of his old city, and up some curious outside stairs, and then again by innumerable inside ones, we reached the old woman's rooms. Of these there were two—at least, we saw no more. Both were poor and bare, and the old lace-seller was wrinkled, unclean, good-humored, and eager. She talked volubly, not being obliged to use a foreign tongue to help herself out, but going on with her soft, gliding, but quick Venetian tones. Travelling in Italy and coming in contact with all classes of the people is apt sadly to take down one's scholarly conceit in knowing the language of Dante

and Petrarch; for all the classicism of one's school-days goes for very little in bargaining for lace, giving orders in a shop or market, or trying not to let boat-and-donkey-men cheat you to your face. There is this one comfort: that if you often cannot understand the people, they can almost invariably understand you (unless your accent be altogether outrageous), which saves John Bull and his American cousin the ignominy of being brought an umbrella when they have asked for mushrooms, and actually taken the trouble to give a diagram of that vegetable.

The prices were kept so obstinately above our means that all purchase of lace was impossible; but the old woman was untiring in displaying her stores of antique treasures, and we felt sufficiently rewarded for our expedition. She herself was worth a visit; for, like many ancient Italian matrons, and not a few nearer home, she was one of that generation of models whom you would have sworn has endured from the days of Titian and Vandyke, immortally old and unchangeably wrinkled. You see such faces in the galleries, with the simple title "Head of an old man"—or old woman, as the case may be—attributed to some famous painter; and these weird portraits attract you far more than the youth, and beauty, and health, and prosperity of the Duchess of Este, the baker's handsome daughter, or the gorgeous Eastern sibyl. Again, you do not care to have any allegorical meaning tacked on to that intensely human face; you would be disgusted if you found it set down in the catalogue as "a Parca," a magician, or a witch. You seem to know it, to remember one which was like it, to connect it with many human vi-

cissitudes and common, though not the less pathetic, troubles. She is probably poor and has been hard-working; wifeness and motherhood have been stern realities to her, instead of poems lived in luxurious houses and earthly plenty; her youth's romance was probably short, fervid, passionate, but soon lapsed into the dreary struggle of the poor for bare life. Chance and old age have made her look hard, though in truth her heart would melt at a tender love-tale like that of a girl of fifteen, and her brave, bright nature belies the lines on her face. Just as women live this kind of life nowadays, so they did three and five hundred years ago; so did probably those very models immortalized by great painters; so did others long before art had reached the possibility of truthful portraiture.

Our old friend the lace-seller, though she has given occasion for this rambling digression, did not, however, at the time, suggest all these things to our mind.

If she herself was a type of certain models of the old masters, her wares were also a reminder of famous people, scenes, and places of Venice. They were all of one kind, all of native manufacture, and, of course, all made by hand. In a certain degenerate fashion this industry is still continued, but the specimens of modern work which we saw were coarse and valueless in comparison with those of the old. There were collars and cuffs in abundance, such as both men and women wore—large, broad, Vandyked collars like those one sees in Venetian pictures; flounces, or rather straight bands of divers widths, from five to twenty inches, which had more probably belonged to albs and cottas. They sug-



gested rich churches and gorgeous ceremonial in a time when nobles and people were equally devoted to splendid shows, prosperity and loftiness, and a picturesque blending of the religious and the imperial. Chasubles stiff with gems and altars of precious stones seem to harmonize well with these priceless veils, woven over with strange, hieroglyphic-looking, conventional, yet beautiful forms; intricate with tracery which, put into stone, would immortalize a sculptor; full of knots, each of which is a miniature masterpiece of embroidery; and the whole the evident product of an artist's brain. This lace has not the gossamer-like beauty of Brussels. It is thick and close in its texture, and is of that kind which looks best on dark velvets and heavy, dusky cloths—just what one would fancy the grave Venetian signiors wearing on state occasions. It matches somehow with the antique XVth and XVIth century jewelry—the magnificent, artistic, heavy collars of the great orders of chivalry; it has something solid, substantial, and splendid about it. Such lace used to be sold to kings and senators, not by a paltry yard measure, but by at least twice its weight in gold; for the price was “as many gold pieces as would cover the quantity of lace required.” Now, although this princely mode of barter is out of fashion, old Venetian “point” is still one of the costliest luxuries in the world, and the rich foreigners who visit Venice usually carry

away at least as much as will border a handkerchief or trim a cap, as a memento of the beautiful and once imperial city of the Adriatic. The modern lace—one can scarcely call it *imitation*, any more than Salviati's modern Venetian glass and mosaic can be so called—seems to be deficient in the beauty and intricacy of design of the old specimens; it is so little sought after that the industry stands a chance of dying out, at least until after the old stock is exhausted and necessity drives the lace-makers to ply their art more delicately.

Some modern lace, the English Honiton and some of the Irish lace, is quite as perfect and beautiful, and very nearly as costly, as the undoubted specimens the history of which can be traced back for two or three hundred years. But from what we saw of Venetian point, the new has sadly degenerated from the old, and exact copying of a few antique models would be no detriment to the modern productions. To the unlearned eye there is no difference between Venetian glass three or four hundred years old, carefully preserved in a national museum, and the manufactures of last month, sold in Salviati's warerooms in Venice and his shop in London. Connoisseurs say they *do* detect some inferiority in the modern work; but as to the lace, even the veriest tyro in such lore can see the rough, tasteless, coarse appearance of the new when contrasted with the old.