

## PART II.—THE CITY

“They might chirp and chaffer, come and go  
For pleasure or profit, her men alive—  
My business is hardly with them I trow,  
But with the empty cells of the human hive;  
—With the chapter-room, the cloister-porch,  
The church's apsis, aisle or nave,  
Its crypt, one fingers along with a torch,  
Its face set full for the sun to shave.”

—*Browning.*

### SECTION I

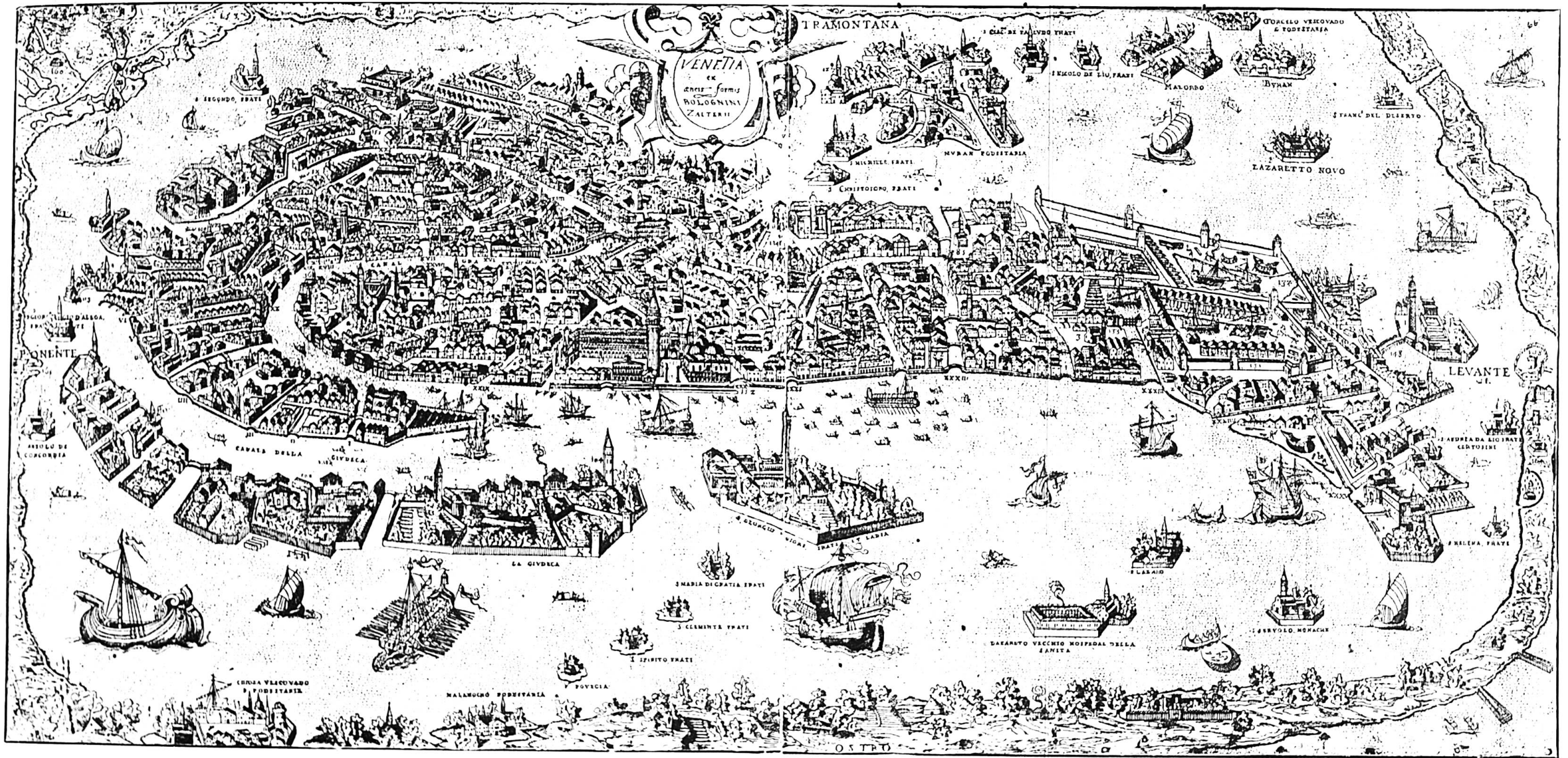
#### *Arrival—The Piazza*

THAT traveller will best attune himself to the peculiar charm of Venice, who arrives after sunset, when evening has veiled the somewhat unlovely approach to the city by railway. For the great lagoon State ever set her face to the sea and adorned herself to welcome her guests as they were rowed from Fusina, or as they sailed up from the Adriatic, to land at the Molo, the chief landing-stage by the Piazzetta. The modern visitor arriving by train is like one who should enter a stately mansion by the stables. Once, however, in his gondola, the “black Triton” of the lagoons, gliding along the waterways to the strangers’ quarter by lines of houses and palaces, whose walls, timeworn or neglected, sometimes degraded, will be mellowed under the dim light of the infrequent lamps, he will be caught by the spell which Venice casts over those who come to her.

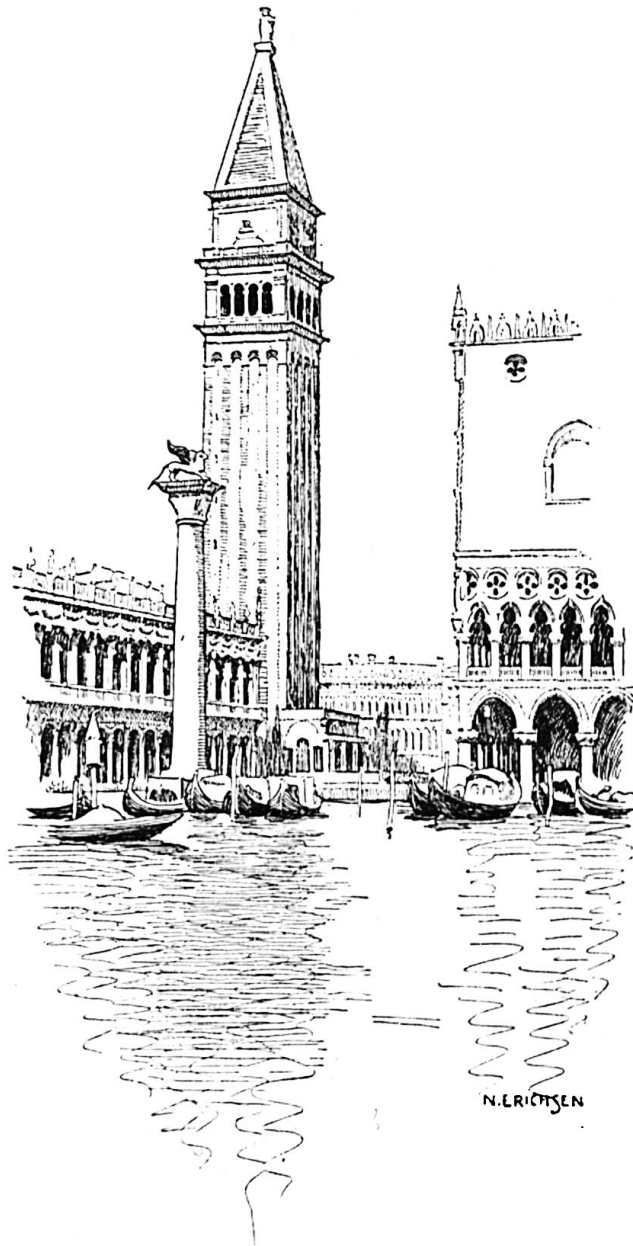
• But there are two Venices: the Venice of the canals and the Venice of the streets. The traveller will do well therefore to go on foot to some of the sights he would see, for by no other means can he do justice to the varied beauty of the

streets, the quaint fragmentary remains of ancient architecture, the brilliant patches of colour, the little shrines, and all the countless details that go to make the by-ways of the city so full of surprise and pleasure to the pedestrian. The difficulty of finding one's way from point to point has been greatly exaggerated. Anyone with a map and a normal sense of direction can with a little patience reach his destination. The churches are usually situated on or near a *campo*; a stream of people will generally be found passing along the streets and over the bridges between the *campi*, and a well-worn track marks the more frequented ways. If he should find himself blocked by a canal or a blind alley, a short deviation to the right or left will generally lead to one of the 380 bridges by which, to use Evelyn's picturesque phrase, the city is tacked together. Even if hopelessly lost, a *soldino* given to a boy will soon bring him to where he would go.

The waterways, 150 in all, are divided into *canali* and *rii*. The *canale* is the broader, the *rio* the narrower stream. The *rii* are by far the greater in number. But the pedestrian is more concerned with street nomenclature. A *fondamenta* is a way alongside a *canale* or *rio*; a *calle* is a street with houses on either side; *ruga* or *rughetta* (French *rue*, *ruelle*) was first applied to streets with a few new houses here and there; the appellation was retained in later times when the houses or shops became continuous; a *salizzata* is one of the earliest of the paved streets, generally near a church; a *rio terra*, a *rio* filled up and paved; a *piscina*, a fish-pond treated in the same way; a *ponte*, a bridge; a *campo*, a paved, open place, formerly a field; a *campiello*, a smaller *campo*; a *corte*, a court. Avoid a *vico cieco*, or a *viccolo cieco*, which have no thoroughfare. The city is divided into six *sestieri* or wards, subdivided into *parocchie* or parishes. The houses are numbered by *sestieri*, the numbers reaching to thousands. The Merceria, a crowded thoroughfare, leads from under the Clock Tower in St Mark's Square, after many kinks and turns, to the Rialto bridge over the



VENICE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY



THE PIAZZETTA

Grand Canal, which is spanned by two other bridges about equidistant from the Rialto bridge. E. and W. of the Rialto, in addition to these bridges, numerous ferries (*traghetti*) make either bank of the Grand Canal easy of access, and small steamers (*vaporetti*) call at frequent piers the whole length of the chief waterway. Travelling by gondola, therefore, is to be regarded as a luxury rather than a necessity. The gondola bears the same relation to Venetian life as does the cab or carriage to the dweller in an ordinary town. The average tide is about twenty inches: on exceptional occasions, the difference between high and low tides has been six feet.

The Piazza of S. Marco offers to the traveller a scene of unparalleled interest. Eastwards it is adorned by the most wonderful group of Byzantine and Gothic architecture in Europe. To the N. is the rhythmic symmetry of Pietro Lombardo's Procuratie Vecchie, ending with the Clock Tower<sup>1</sup>; to the S. are the Procuratie Nuove, Scamozzi's tasteless elaboration of Sansovino's lovely design for the Libreria Vecchia on the Piazzetta. Westward is the baser structure of Napoleonic times. Opposite the Porta della Carta of the Ducal Palace stood for a thousand years the old Campanile, like a giant sentinel set towards the lagoons to watch over the city. On the morning of July 14th, 1902, to the stupefaction of the Venetians, the huge tower, which in its massive strength seemed to defy the tooth of time, gently collapsed, as though weary of its millennial watch, crushing in its fall Sansovino's beautiful Loggetta and the N. side of the Libreria Vecchia, but miraculously doing no further hurt. When the Venetians recovered from the shock and learned how mercifully exempt from toll of human life the disaster had been, and that St Mark's and the Ducal Palace were unscathed, they remembered their protector and said: *È stato galant' uomo*

<sup>1</sup> Now assigned to Moro Coducci of Bergamo.

*S. Marco* (St Mark has been a good fellow). Ten months later, when the King and Queen of Italy, during their visit to Venice, turned to look at the site of the old tower, a lament was heard in the crowd of people: *I varda dove gera el nostro povero morto* (They are going where our poor dead one lies). The foundations laid a thousand years before were found to be as sound as ever, and a new Campanile has now been raised to replace, though it cannot restore, the old one, which, with all its dramatic history and romantic associations, has disappeared for ever.

It is not by accident that the chief buildings of Venice stand where they do, for this part of the Rialtine islands, called *il Morso*, offered a soil harder<sup>1</sup> and more tenacious than any other. In early ages the Piazza was a grass-grown field, called the Broglio or Garden, scarce a third of its present area, and a large elder tree flourished on the site of the Campanile. It was bounded on the W. by a rio which ran from N. to S. a few yards beyond the Campanile and discharged into the Grand Canal to the W. of the present Zecca (mint). On the W. bank of the rio, facing the basilica of St Mark, stood the old church of S. Geminiano. In 1176 Doge Ziani filled up the rio, razed the fortifications and extended and paved the Piazza to its present boundary westward. The church of S. Geminiano was rebuilt at the W. end. It was again rebuilt by Sansovino in 1556 and finally demolished by Napoleon I. to extend the Royal Palace. Houses on the S. abutted on the Campanile. The Piazza was enclosed by stately mansions with columns and arcades on the first floor, "where one walked round as in a theatre."<sup>2</sup> When Scamozzi built the Procuratie Nuove in 1584, the houses on the S. were demolished and the Piazza set back to its present line. If we would restore its aspect in the fulness of Venetian prosperity, we must imagine

<sup>1</sup> The Ducal Palace is not built on piles, but rests on a stratum of stiff clay.

<sup>2</sup> Sanudo.



a scene brilliant with colour. The archivolts, capitals, friezes and sculptures generally of St Mark's and the Ducal Palace were richly decorated with gold and vermilion and blue. The Porta della Carta glowed so with gold that it was known as the *Porta dorata* (the gilded portal). The bronze horses were gilded; so was St Mark's Lion and St Theodore in the Piazzetta. From Leopardi's beautiful bronze sockets three tall masts upheld the standards symbolising dominion over Greece, Cyprus and Crete.

A throng of merchants and strangers from all the corners of the earth, an ever-changing pageant of quaint and gorgeous costumes, passed and repassed. So many strange tongues would you hear, says an old writer,<sup>1</sup> that the Piazza might not inaptly be called the *forum orbis non urbis*—not the market-place of a city but of the world. Strange tongues are still heard in the Piazza, but of those who come for the pleasure, not for the business of the world: the heart of commerce no longer beats at Venice. The Piazza is, however, a scene of much animation on public holidays when the band is playing. We will sit outside Florian's coffee-house, as a good Venetian should, and observe the women of the people passing, with their graceful carriage and simple costume, their wealth of hair so charmingly treated; the gondolier, lithe of body and superb in gait; the *signore* and *signorine* with their more modern finery; the fashionable youth, dressed, as he fondly imagines, *all' inglese*; rich and poor, *borgnese* and *popolano*, bearing themselves with that ease of manner, vivacity of spirit and social equality so characteristic of the Venetians. In the height of summer, when the rich merchants of Milan and other cities of North Italy with their women folk come to Venice for the Italian season, the Piazza after dinner and far into the night becomes one vast open-air salon, crowded with visitors in the most *chic* of costumes, many of the ladies promenading in evening dress. As one sits in the Piazza at setting sun, the atmosphere,

<sup>1</sup> *Italia brevis Descriptio*, Ultrajecti, 1650.

exquisitely delicate and clear, changes from pale blue to amethyst, pink, turquoise, dark blue and indigo; and the night is lovelier than the day.

## SECTION II

### *The Basilica of St Mark*

FEW things in the history of art are more remarkable than the revulsion of taste that has taken place with regard to the architecture of Venice. In the early part of the nineteenth century, before Ruskin wrote "The Stones of Venice," an English architect,<sup>1</sup> giving expression to the professional judgment of the age, speaks of "the lumpy form of the Cathedral which surprises you by the extreme ugliness of its exterior; of the lower part built in the degraded Roman we call Norman; of the gouty columns and ill-made capitals, all in bad taste." "The Ducal Palace is even more ugly than anything previously mentioned," vastly inferior to Palladio's churches of S. Giorgio and the Redentore. Disraeli echoes in "Contarini Fleming" the conventional lay praise of Palladio, and writes of the "barbarous although picturesque buildings called the Ducal Palace." Even to-day the stranger fresh from the North with memories of the massive towers and lofty spires of his own architecture will hardly escape a sense of disappointment as he stands before St Mark's. The fabric will seem to lack majesty and to be even less imposing than the Ducal Palace. It must, however, be remembered that the raising of the level of the Piazza has somewhat detracted from the elevation of both the basilica and the Palace. Fynes Moryson notes in his Itinerary (1617) that "there were stairs of old to mount out of the market-place into the church till the waters of the channel increasing they were forced to raise the height of the market-place."

<sup>1</sup> "Letters of an Architect from France, Italy and Greece," by Joseph Woods, 1828, vol. i., p. 256, *et seq.*