

SECTION XVII

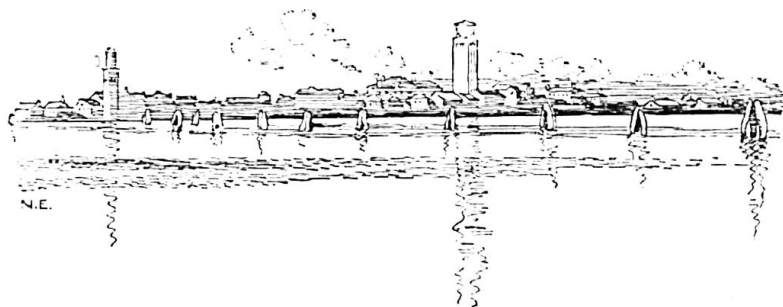
Titian's House—S. Michele in Isola—Murano

Few parts of Venice have suffered more from the disfigurement wrought by national decadence, poverty and insensibility than that now bounded by the *Fondamente nuove*. In the sixteenth century this was one of the most charming quarters of the city. Here stood the smaller pleasure palaces of the patricians, with delicious gardens sloping down to the sea, whither they could retire after the business of the day to refresh themselves and entertain their friends. The gardens gave on that exquisite prospect where:—

“ the hoar
And æry Alps towards the north appeared
Thro' mist an heaven-sustaining bulwark reared
Between the east and west ; and half the sky
Was roofed with clouds of rich emblazonry.”

At evening over the face of the waters, fanned by the

cooling breezes of the north, glided the "black Tritons" of the lagoons, graced by the wit and fashion and beauty of Venice. Salutation and repartee were winged with laughter from mouth to mouth, and stanza alternating with stanza of Tasso's noble verse answered each other in song over the rippling sea. Titian's palace,¹ where the master entertained all who were celebrated in art and literature, stood near the present Fondamenta. While the tables were being laid the guests were taken to see his great collection of pictures, then for a stroll about his beautiful gardens. The banquet was



MURANO

arranged with delightful art; tables were loaded with the most delicate viands and the most precious wines; music of sweet voices and many instruments accompanied the feast. Pleasures and amusements followed, suited to the season and the guests, until midnight closed the revelry.

There was no brick wall then fencing about the fair island of S. Michele with its beautiful churches, cloisters and gardens; no cloud of coal smoke fouling the atmosphere of Murano; it too adorned with palaces and lovely pleasaunces.

We make our way to the ferry steamer for Murano, which leaves the Fondamente Nuove every quarter of an hour. How has the glory of Murano departed—*Muranum deliciae et voluptas civium Venetorum!* Its palaces, and pleasure grounds are said by an anonymous writer of the seventeenth

¹ Now hidden by workmen's dwellings.

century¹ to be beautiful beyond description. Spacious chambers and banqueting halls were hung with tapestry wrought with scenes from the Punic wars, and furnished with the most precious and ornate productions of Venetian craftsmen. Delicious gardens were traversed by artfully designed paths and provided with arbours of interlaced foliage; fountains, fish-ponds, cool grottos adorned with coral and shells in charming taste, pastures gay with the manifold colours of flowers, and trees bearing choicest fruits. Classic peristyles and *exedrae*, decorated with paintings and arabesques, afforded shelter from the heat of the sun or from rain, and invited to quiet converse.

On gaining the island of Murano we follow the *Fondamenta Vetrai* and soon reach the church of S. Pietro Martire, which possesses Giov. Bellini's altarpiece (1488), the Virgin and Child, to whom St Mark presents Doge Agostino Barbarigo. Notwithstanding the clumsiness of restorers this remains one of the most precious of Venetian paintings.

We continue along the *Fondamenta*, and cross the Ponte Vivarini to the ancient basilica of SS. Mary and Donatus. Legend tells of the Emperor Otho I. caught in a fearful storm, and vowing, if saved, to build a church to the Virgin, who appeared to him in a vision and indicated this very triangular space, bright with a mass of red lilies, as the chosen spot. To the basilica of S. Maria here erected, Doge Dom. Michele gave in 1125 the body of S. Donatus and the bones of the slain dragon, which are still suspended over the high altar. The story of the saint, as related by the worthy sacristan of the church with dramatic gestures, is as follows:—A terrible dragon once devastated Cephalonia, devouring the inhabitants and poisoning the waters of the river up which it swam. The good bishop Donatus determined to rid the land of the monster, and, accompanied by his clergy, went towards the river to confront it. On its appearance the clergy fled, but

¹ *Italiae brevis descriptio*. Ultrajecti, 1650.

the saint boldly advanced alone and spat at the beast, which at once fell dead. Donatus then took a cup, and drinking of the water of the river, found it pure and sweet, called back his clergy and showed them the dead monster.

The exterior of the apse, with its masterly decoration of coloured brick and marble so lovingly described by Ruskin in the "Stones of Venice," is one of the most interesting examples of twelfth century Lombard architecture in North Italy.

We enter and note the rare and precious pavement of the church which is finer even than that of St Mark's. Much of it has been broken up and reset, but enough has remained undisturbed to rejoice the eye of the traveller. The quaint designs are wrought of opus Alexandrinum, porphyry, *verde antico* and mosaic. A favourite subject is that of two cocks bearing between them a fox with feet bound—the triumph of watchfulness over cunning. The date, September 1, 1140, may still be read on the pavement in the middle of the nave near the main entrance. The tall, solitary figure of the Virgin in the act of blessing in the apse is a twelfth-century mosaic. An example of Sebastiani's work—Virgin and Child with the Baptist, St Donatus and the donor (1484)—will be found in the L. aisle.

The local museum possesses a unique collection of Venetian glass of the finest period by the Berovieri family and the Dalmatian Zorzi il Ballerin, some of the ancient luminous red glass contrasted with a modern imitation, and a Libro d'Oro with genealogies of members of this, the closest of the guilds of Venice (p. 213). Descendants of the Berovieri still work for Salviati.