

SECTION XVIII

Torcello—S. Francesco del Deserto

THE poor and almost desolate island of Torcello lies N.E. of Murano and may be reached by steamer, or by gondola with two rowers.

The ride by gondola is a delightful experience. As we are urged along the channels by the stalwart gondoliers with rhythmic strokes, lagoons, islands and mainland villages unfold themselves to our sight. A little group of cottages amid some poplars to the N.W. is all that remains of the once great and rich Roman city of Altinum. To the N.E., among the islands and groups of trees that seem to float mysteriously poised in the soft grey vaporous atmosphere, is S. Francesco del Deserto, with its cypress groves and solitary stone pine, where St Francis bade his little sisters the birds keep silence while he prayed (p. 73).

The tall, square campanile of Torcello has long been in view. We pass St James of the Marshes (S. Giacomo della Palude), now a powder magazine, then Burano, and at length enter a canal, pass under a decayed bridge,¹ and are landed at the edge of a sloping plot of grass, once the busy market-place of an important city. The cathedral or S. Maria has been twice restored or rebuilt (864 and 1088), but much of the material and probably the apse of the original basilica still survive in the actual fabric. Less than fifteen years since could be seen the old episcopal throne and semi-circular tiers of seats worn by generations of Christian pastors² as they sat amid their clergy facing the people. But the seats have been rebuilt and the throne partly restored with ill-fitting slabs of cheap Carrara marble. We

¹ Painted in Walter Crane's "Bridge of Life."

² In primitive times the bishop sat in the centre of the apse facing the congregation, just as the judge had done in the law-courts, which served as models for the first Christian churches.

remember visiting the cathedral shortly after the renewal with a young Italian architect, who, to our expression of pained surprise, replied, *Ma' signore, era in disordine* (but, sir, it was so untidy). There is no *disordine* now in the scraped and restored interior. Many of the original marbles, with beautiful and virile designs, however, still remain in the chancel; and in the facings of the pulpit stairs, hewn into blocks and placed in position by the old builders with small regard for continuity of design, we may perhaps gaze on the very stones brought from the mainland at the time of the great migration under Bishop Paul. The restored thirteenth-century mosaic of the Last Judgment on the W. wall, with its ingenuous realism and grim humour, is unrelated in style to anything in St Mark's, and is the analogue of many a sculptured Gothic west front in northern Europe. The mosaic in the apse, the Virgin and the Twelve Apostles, with an Annunciation on the spandrels, is Byzantine in style, and believed by Saccardo to be late seventh-century work.

We note the old stone shutters of the windows as we pass to the campanile, which lost one-third of its height by a lightning stroke in 1640. A magnificent view of the lagoons and the mainland is obtained from the summit. The remarkable little church of S. Fosca, with its picturesque portico round the apse, is Byzantine in plan, and was in existence before 1011. It was restored in 1247 and again later. The cupola has disappeared and is replaced by a low tiled roof, but the four arches which carried the old dome still remain. A rudely-carved font of alabaster is worth notice. On our way back we may touch at the island of S. Francesco del Deserto. The friars give a gracious welcome, but true followers of the *poverello* that they are, will accept no gifts' in return save reverence and courtesy. A little church and monastery were built around the spot where St Francis prayed, and a small brotherhood have for seven centuries kept unbroken the traditions of their gentle father.