

CHAPTER VII

The Oligarchy—Commercial supremacy—The Bajamonte Conspiracy—The Council of the Ten—The Prisons

“O thou that art situate at the entry of the sea which art a merchant of the people for many isles, . . . thou hast said: I am of perfect beauty. Thy borders are in the midst of the seas, thy builders have perfected thy beauty. . . . Thy wise men were thy pilots. . . . All the ships of the sea were in thee to occupy thy merchandise. . . . Syria was thy merchant . . . they occupied in thy fairs with emeralds, purple and brodered work, fine linen and coral and agate.”—*Ezekiel*.

THE fourteenth century opens the era of the oligarchy. Venice had made peace with the only rival that could challenge her maritime supremacy. She had not yet entangled herself in an aggressive continental policy. The tramp of the advancing Turk was too far away to echo in the lagoons. The wealth of the Indies and of the far East flowed through her markets. Her merchants laid the known world under contribution. “By way of the Syrian ports and of Alexandria came the cloves, nutmegs, mace and ebony of the Moluccas; the sandal wood of Timor; the costly camphor of Borneo; the benzoin of Sumatra and Java; the aloes wood of Cochin China; the perfumes, gums, spices, silks and innumerable curiosities of China, Japan and Siam; the rubies of Pegu; the fine fabrics of Coromandel; the richer stuffs of Bengal; the spikenard of Nepaul and Bhutan; the diamonds of Golconda; the Damascus steel of Nirmul; the pearls, sapphires, topazes and cinnamon of Ceylon; the pepper, ginger and satin wood of Malabar; the lac, agates and sumptuous brocades and jewelry of Cambay; the costus and graven vessels, wrought arms and brodered shawls of Cashmere; the bdellium of Scinde; the musk of Thibet; the galbanum of Khorossan; the assafœtida of Afghanistan;

the sagapenum of Persia; the ambergris, civet and ivory from Zanzibar; the myrrh, balsam and frankincense of Zeila, Berbera and Shehr."¹ The bare recital of this catalogue has the effect of a poem and fills the imagination with visions of Oriental splendour. Every year six trading fleets averaging about five hundred vessels each sailed, one for the Black Sea, another for Greece and Constantinople; others for the Syrian ports; for Egypt, Barbary and North Africa; for Flanders and England. These ships were the property of the State, and in due time a public crier announced the number of galleasses ready for the annual voyages. They were farmed out to the highest bidders, who were required to prove their qualifications and the amount of their capital, and to provide on each galleasse accommodation, a suitable mess, and space for a small cargo, for eight young nobles, who thus were trained in naval science and gained experience of commerce. The vessels were constructed on fixed models and convertible at will into men-of-war. Every man aboard, passenger or seaman, bore arms, and was compelled to fight the ship in case of attack. Standardised fittings were obtainable at every Venetian maritime station to replace any that might be lost or damaged by storm or battle. The food and comfort of the seamen were carefully provided for. A cross painted or carved on the side served as a load-line, and Government inspectors checked any attempt to overload. Each ship carried a band of music.

The cargo of a Syrian or Egyptian galleasse was worth about two hundred thousand² ducats, and it has been estimated that the Republic in the fifteenth century could dispose of three thousand three hundred ships, thirty-six thousand seamen and sixteen thousand shipwrights. The consuls at every Venetian port were charged to inspect the weights and measures of the traders and to prevent adultera-

¹ Birdwood, Report on the old records of the India Office.

² The value of a ducat is estimated by Col. Yule at about 9s. 6d. of English money.

tion or fraud. If the consul were found to be venal he was branded on the forehead. At home the same measures were taken to maintain the standard of quality. In 1550 English woollen goods from the Thames were exposed with the brand of the Senate upon them in St Mark's Palace as evidence of English dishonesty and the decay of English faith. In the fifteenth century, when Turkish pirates infested the seas, *navi armate* (war-ships) were built to convoy the merchant fleets, and a state navy was thus formed in which slaves or criminals were forced to work the oars.

In 1556, sixty out of a gang of Lutherans convicted of heresy, marching through Flanders on their way to the Venetian galleys, were rescued from slavery by the people of Maestricht and their guards stoned. In earlier times, before the navy was differentiated into merchant and war-ships, Slavonians were employed for this exhausting labour, and those who manned the galleasses to Flanders and England possessed a burial vault in North Stoneham Church near Southampton.

In the event of a naval war a levy was made on all the male inhabitants. Those liable were divided into groups of twelve and lots were drawn to decide who should serve first. The unfit provided substitutes or were fined. Those on service were given free bread rations and were paid five lire a month by the Commune and one lira from each man of the twelve who was not chosen. Romanin estimates that the equipment of a galley in the early thirteenth century was equal to that of a frigate of seventy-four guns in his day (1850). The discipline was perfect. The seamen were said to obey their chiefs as sheep do their shepherd. Gambling or swearing was severely punished by flogging.

“When the hour of departure neared, the Commander came on board preceded by trumpeters and followed by his staff. Perfect silence reigned as he began his inspection. Every man was at his post, every oar in its place. All the arms, accoutrements and appointments were carefully examined, and when the trumpeters gave signal for departure

the rowers simultaneously plied their oars, or if the wind were fair threw them up and sails¹ were set with marvellous alertness. A general holiday was observed with great pomp and magnificence. The ships were coloured white and vermilion, the sails bright with variegated stripes, the poop was richly gilt, the figure-head of the most beautiful design. The Doge and his Council with dazzling pageantry, senators in scarlet robes, the *élite* of Venetian ladies, famed for grace and beauty and arrayed in gorgeous dresses, and hundreds of citizens in gay goadolas witnessed the departure."² A stirring scene, surpassed alone by that when the clanging of bells from St Mark's tower called the people to view a victorious fleet sailing up the lagoons and the enemy's standards trailing on the waters.

In Gradenigo's reign we note the first indication of a policy of territorial aggrandisement on the Italian mainland. Little wars had already been waged: with the Paduans in 1142, to prevent the diversion of the course of the Brenta; and with Ferrara in 1240, to maintain trading privileges. In 1308 these were again endangered by a dispute between rival claimants for the lordship of Ferrara. Venice intervened and was brought into conflict with the Pope. His Holiness, as a temporal enemy, fought at a vantage, for to the material bolts of Mars he was able to add the spiritual thunders of the Church. When the Papal warning was received, the Doge addressed the Councillors, and stoutly defended his policy and told them that they were not children to be frightened by words. There was an angry scene in the council chamber, and for once the ominous cries, "Guelph and Ghibelline," were heard within the walls of the palace. The ducal party maintained their position and the ban was laid on Venice. The Doge, his Councillors and the citizens were excommunicated,

¹ The tune sung by sailors to-day as they lift the anchor is the same as that sung a thousand years ago by the Venetians as they manned their oars or spread their sails.

² Lindsay's "History of Merchant Shipping."

their possessions in Ferrara confiscated, every treaty with them declared void, commercial relations forbidden, and all the clergy summoned to leave. The Pope's words, however, were winged with terror to the Venetians. News soon came of banks, factories and ships sacked in Italy, France and England, and even in far Asia. Their trade, except with the infidel, was paralysed; religious and civic life disintegrated. But the Republic never wined. On the very day that the papal interdict reached Venice instructions were sent to the Venetian *podestà* at Ferrara to fortify himself in *Castel Tebaldo* and manfully and potently to uphold the rights and honour of his country.

The Venetian garrison, however, weakened by disease, surrendered after a long struggle, and met the fate of the vanquished. The fleet was destroyed, and growing unrest in the State forced the Doge and his party to make terms with the Pope. Ferrara was acknowledged to be a papal fief, and an indemnity paid for the restoration of the trading privileges of the Republic.

In the year of the *Serrata* the corpses of Bocconi, a popular leader, and ten of his followers dangled between the red columns as a warning to the disaffected, but after the inglorious issue of the war the discontent of the people was intensified, and found a rallying-point in certain ambitious and disgraced nobles of the Quirini, Tiepolo and Badger¹ families, who were united by a common hatred of the ducal party. Secret meetings were held in Casa Quirini near the Rialto, and Bajamonte, the people's darling, the "*Gran Cavaliere*," son of Jacopo Tiepolo, was drawn into the conspiracy. It was determined to organise a revolution and assassinate the Doge and his chief supporters. The insurrection was fixed for Sunday, June 14th, 1310, the eve of St Vito's Day. Down the two main avenues of traffic that debouch from the north on the Piazza, the Calle dei Fabri and the Merceria, two divisions under the leadership of Marco Quirini, the chief

¹ The name adopted by the Partecipazii at the end of the ninth century.

conspirator, and of Bajamonte, were to march and simultaneously attack the palace, meanwhile Badoer was sent to collect sympathisers at Padua. All had been foreseen save the treachery of man and of the elements. In the early dawn, as the revolutionists rushed from Casa Quirini, shouting "Liberty" and "Death to Doge Gradenigo," their faces were lashed by a driving rain, their voices smothered by peals of thunder and the howling of the wind. The movements failed to synchronise, and the Quirini section encountered in the Piazza, not their allies from the Merceria, but a ducal force which scattered them and slew their leader and his son. Men who will betray the State will betray their fellows. The plot had been divulged by one Marco Donato, and the Doge had met the danger with his wonted courage and alertness. He increased his guards, summoned help from Chioggia, Murano and Torcello, called out the arsenal men, armed his Councillors and their servants. Having disposed of the Quirini, the Doge was able to deal with Bajamonte's division in the Merceria. During the fighting Bajamonte's standard-bearer met the fate of Abimelech.¹ A woman aimed a stone mortar from an upper window at him: it struck him on the head, and the bearer and the banner inscribed with the word, "Liberty," fell to the ground. Panic seized the rebels and they fled across the Rialto bridge. Meanwhile the remnant of Quirini's party rallied and made a stand on the Campo S. Lucia, only to be finally crushed by members of the Painters' Guild and of the Guild of Charity. A more serious task remained, to subdue Bajamonte and his followers, who had hewn down the bridge and fortified themselves in some houses yon side the Rialto. After many negotiations the rebels surrendered. Their lives were spared, but they agreed to banish themselves from Venetian territory. Ill-hap, too, had fallen on Badoer's reinforcements, which were defeated by the Chioggians. Badoer and his chief followers

¹ "And a certain woman cast a piece of a millstone upon Abimelech's head, and all to brake his skull."—JUDGES ix. 53.



THE CLOCK TOWER AND ENTRANCE TO THE MERCERIA.

were captured and hanged between the red columns. To perpetuate the memory of this narrow escape from a great peril S. Vito's Day was made a day of public festival and thanksgiving for evermore. To Marco Donato and his descendants was granted membership of the Great Council. The woman, Lucia Rosso, who had cast the fateful mortar, being asked to name her reward, begged permission to fly the standard of St Mark from her window on every feast day, and desired that the procurators of St Mark, to whom the house belonged, would not raise to her or to her successors the annual rental of fifteen ducats. The house, known as the *Casa e bottega della grazia del mortar*, appears from an old painting in the Correr Museum to have stood on the site of the first house on the left-hand side of the Merceria entering from the Piazza. The mortar was cast from the third floor window. "The banner I have seen raised," says Sanudo, "but now that the new buildings are made it can no longer be seen from the Piazza. The under part of Marco Quirini's house in Rialto was made into shambles, and there they remain to this day" (about 1520).¹ Bajamonte's house in S. Agostino was razed, the site made over to the commune, and a column set up in the Campo S. Agostino with an inscription stating that the "land once Bajamonte's had been confiscated for his wicked treachery and to inspire others with terror."² Certain of the marbles of the house were assigned by the Republic in 1316 for the restoration of the church of S. Vito. For eighteen years Bajamonte lived in exile and never ceased to plot his revenge until he was secretly disposed of by an emissary of the Ten.

The Consiglio de' Dieci shares with the *Comité du Salut publique* a sinister notoriety in history. Let us see how far the earlier and more enduring body deserves its reputation. The great plot had showed the urgent need of an executive

¹The Quirini house is now incorporated in the new Fish Market.

²The column is now in the Museo Civico.

able to act with rapidity and secrecy. The Council of Ten was appointed to deal with further developments of the plot, but proved so admirable and effective an instrument that it was more than once renewed and finally made permanent in 1335. The Ten were charged "to preserve the liberty and peace of the subjects of the Republic and protect them from the abuses of personal power." They were elected by the Great Council with careful deliberation among the most reputable of the citizens, and no more than one member of any family could serve. A member sat for one year, he was not eligible for re-election, he received no pay, he was obliged to retire if any of his relations were among the accused; it was a capital offence to receive a gift of any nature. His term of service ended, the dread decemvir passed again into private life. The Ten elected from themselves three chiefs (*Capi*) who served for one month, during which period they were forbidden to go about the city, to frequent shops or other public places where the nobility were wont to gather. Among other duties, on the first day of their month the *Capi* were required to send to the Signory a list of the prisoners detained by order of the Ten with suggestions for any reform or improvement in the prisons, and to take measures to expedite the trial of the accused. They were to report to the Council all the arrests made by the previous *Capi* and to remind the Council of all cases *sub judice* in the preceding month. The Doge and his six Privy Councillors were present at the sittings, and a legal officer without a vote watched the proceedings to check any abuse of power. Secret denunciations placed in the *Bocche del leone*, especially if unsigned, were subject to most elaborate procedure before they were acted upon. The accused were usually interrogated in darkness, but if five-sixths of the tribunal agreed, the interrogation might take place in the light. They could call witnesses. If the minutes of the trial exceeded a hundred and fifty sheets they were read a second time on another day, that the members

might refresh their strained powers of attention. The defence was read entire. If the condemnation, after five ballotings, did not command more than half the votes of the Council, the accused was set at liberty or the case was retried. When the condemnation had gained an absolute majority it was subject to four re-ballots before being made final and irrevocable. The Ten dealt with — criminal charges against nobles; treachery and conspiracy in the State; espionage; unnatural crimes; secret information likely to be of advantage to the Republic; the regulations of the Greater *Scuole* or Guilds; the use of secret service money; disobedient State officials; false coiners and debasers of the precious metals used in jewellery; forests and mines; the glass industry at Murano; acts of violence on the water; the use of arms; theatres; masked balls and public morals generally; and, after 1692, the censorship of the printing press.

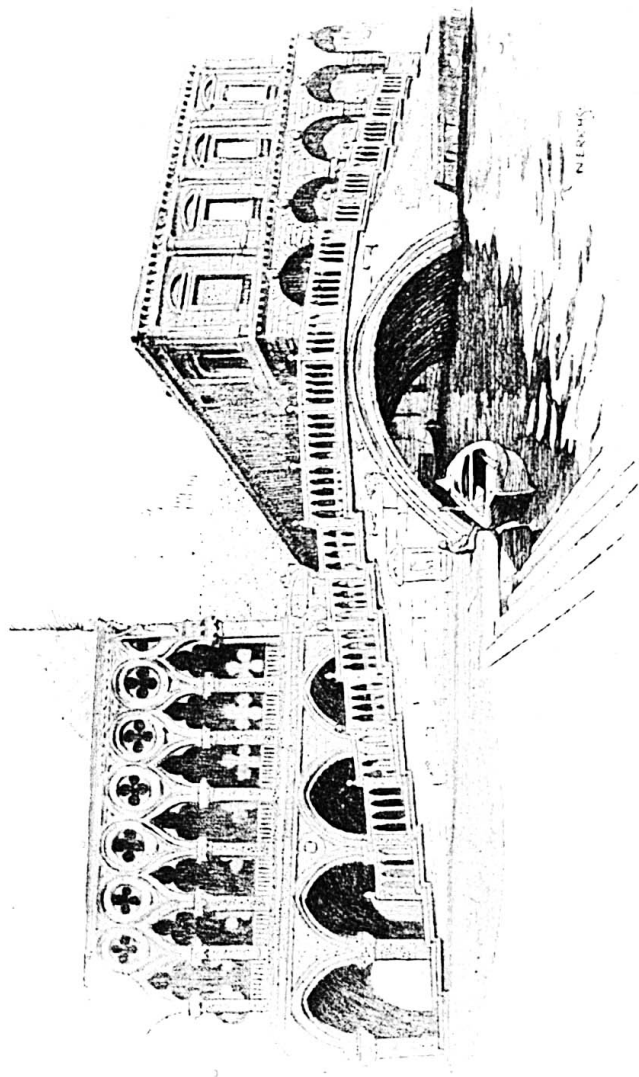
The tribunal could inflict pecuniary fines; corporal punishment; banishment, with power to compass his death if the proscribed one were found outside bounds; imprisonment for any period, and for life; the galleys; mutilation; death, secretly or publicly. The death sentence was generally carried out by decapitation or hanging from the columns of the palace or between the red columns in the Piazzetta. For the more heinous crimes the guilty were conducted in infamous guise along the Grand Canal, flogged and broken upon the wheel. Secret executions were rarely resorted to, and generally with the object of saving the prestige of the nobility by withdrawing from the public gaze the disgrace of an honoured name.

In 1539 the ever-present dread of Spanish plots fed by the gold of the New World led to the permanent establishment of *Il Supremo Terribile Tribunale* of the Three State Inquisitors. For among the large body of State officials and members of councils were many patricians who, impoverished by the decline of commerce, were peculiarly open to corrup-

tion, and the need was felt of a smaller and more expeditious body than the Ten. Of the *Tre Inquisitori di Stato* two were appointed by the Ten, one by the Doge's Privy Council. The latter sat in the middle clothed in red and was called the *rosso*; the former sat one on either side clothed in black, and were known as the *negri*. They served for a year and were eligible for re-election. Service was compulsory under a fine of 500 ducats. Their powers were delegated to them, as emergencies demanded, by the Ten, who reserved the right of revising their judgments, which were also published in the Great Council. If the Three were not unanimous they must refer the case to the Ten. Carefully indicted rules guarded against the abuse of secret denunciations, and against the venality or the errors of spies. Suspects were arrested at night and examined in secret, torture being used in accordance with the usual legal procedure of the day. Witnesses were also examined in secret by the Secretary or a ducal notary. The triumvirs acted with appalling swiftness¹ and secrecy, and stout of heart was he who did not quail when the officer of the Three touched him on the shoulder with the usual formula, "Their Excellencies would like to see you." During the sixteenth century the Ten and its Committee grew to be the dominant body in the State, until in 1582 the right of calling the *Zonta* was abolished, and having no longer the power of associating with them members of any and every council and of spending money they reverted to their former position.

The tribunals occasionally abused their powers, committed some crimes, and made errors. The murder of the Carraras was a national sin; the execution of Foscarini a grievous blunder. But they were a popular body, and with-

¹ The Ten could act promptly too. In 1484, one of the *Capi* crossing the Piazza saw a priest and two soldiers set upon a man with drawn weapons. He ordered their arrest. The same evening the three were hanged by torchlight between the columns.



PONTE DI PAGLIA

stood every attack upon them. They were a bulwark against treachery: they protected the people from the insolence and arbitrariness of nobles: they maintained equality, and were stern censors of morals. Their best defence is the fact that they endured to the fall of the Republic.

Much undeserved obloquy has been cast upon the Ten even by historians of repute when treating of the famous prisons under their charge, the so-called *Pozzi* and *Piombi* (wells and leads). Lurid pictures have been drawn of victims tortured in cells hot as furnaces under the leads, and in dungeons beneath the canal, where neither *light* nor warmth ever penetrated, and where the prisoner *saw* the instruments of his torture on the wall before him. But in truth the *Pozzi* were as little underground as the *Piombi* were (immediately) under the leads. The Ducal Palace had been furnished with prisons from its construction by Angelo Participazio and its restoration by Seb. Ziani until the new prison over the Bridge of Sighs, and beyond the *rio del Palazzo*, was completed in 1606. Except the *Torreselle* (prisons in the towers), one of which, at the angle of the palace overlooking the Ponte della Paglia, was demolished in 1532 by order of the Ten, the old prisons were situated on the east wing of the palace between the inner court and the *rio del Palazzo*, and later extended to the other side towards the Molo on the south. They were on the ground floor, which was sub-divided into two storeys of cells. Some of the windows looked on the public courtyard, and at one period the prisoners could talk with passers-by. They were not known as *Pozzi* before the seventeenth century. After the erection of the new jail on the opposite side of the Rio the so-called *Pozzi* were used for the more dangerous prisoners, and on the fall of the Republic in 1797 four only were found therein, scoundrels who richly deserved their fate. The Republic bore a unique reputation for its humane treatment of prisoners. Zanotto,¹

¹ I pozzi e i piombi. Venice, 1876.

from whose admirable monograph we mainly draw, quotes the testimony of Friar Felice Fabri, who, visiting Venice in the middle of the fifteenth century, was struck by the merciful treatment of the prisoners of the Republic. In 1443 the Great Council appointed an advocate to defend the cause of the poor detained prisoners, and in 1553 a second advocate was chosen. In common with the whole of Christian Europe Venice used torture to extract confessions, but she honourably distinguished herself by appointing a surgeon to examine the prisoners and to report if they were able to bear the infliction. In 1564 the Ten ordered an infirmary to be prepared for sick prisoners. The disinfection and cleanliness of the cells and the quality and quantity of the food and wine supplied to the incarcerated were carefully inspected.

In 1591 the Senate permitted the Ten to make use of a floor above the Sala de' Capi in order that the detained might be in more comfortable, lighter and better-ventilated cells than those allotted to the condemned. The rooms were known as the *Piombi*, since they were on the floor next below the roof, which was covered with lead. According to Zanotto, between the ceilings, which were made of a double layer of larch planks, and the roof, was a space of several yards, varying with the slope of the roof. The rooms were small; roughly, about twelve by fourteen feet, and from six feet to eight feet high, and were wainscoted with larch. They were lighted from a corridor, and ventilators were fixed in the doors. The detained dressed as they pleased, were allowed to see visitors, and to walk in the corridor.

Gradenigo died before the papal ban had been removed, and found quiet sepulture at Murano. A distinguished senator, Stefano Giustiniani, was chosen his successor, but renounced the office and retired to the monastery at S. Giorgio. The annalists relate that while the electors sat anxiously pondering the situation thus created, a saintly old man was seen passing the palace on his daily round of



S. GIORGIO AND S. MARIA DELLA SALUTE.

charity, followed by his servant carrying a load of bread. It was deemed a happy omen, for the need of an understanding with the Pope was urgent, and *Zerzi il Santo* would be an excellent mediator. Being entreated, he accepted the charge and filled the ducal chair for ten months, during which period he was able to obtain a relaxation of the interdict, which was finally removed in the next reign.

Giorgio the Sainted left a troublesome legacy to his successor, Giov. Soranza. Zara, aided by Hungarians and Croats, was again recalcitrant, and only subdued after a heavy expenditure of men and treasure. But Soranza's sixteen and a half years of office coincided with a time of great prosperity, and the strain was lightly borne. Venetian trade, aided by diplomacy and enterprise, expanded eastward and westward. The arts of life were developed. Refugees from Lucca founded a silk industry, which became a source of great profit to the Republic. They were governed by their own magistrates, the *Provisores Sirici*, who were located in the Corte della Seda, near Marco Polo's house. The city was further embellished, and Soranza enjoyed the popularity that comes to a prince ruling in times of plenty. It was in Soranza's reign, August 1321, that Dante came to Venice, an ambassador from Guido Novello da Polenta of Ravenna, to negotiate a peace with the Signory, and returned to die a few days after his arrival at Ravenna of a fever caught on the journey.