

OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

CHRISTIAN WORK IN ITALY.

VENICE—MRS HAMMOND'S WORK AMONGST
BEGGAR BOYS

Italy, from whatever standpoint we view it, is a deeply interesting land. For the artist and the architect it possesses treasures of priceless value; to the student of history, as well as the classical scholar, it offers endless sources of instruction and study. The invalid has recourse to its bright, sunny skies, in the hope of prolonging life, or rendering pleasanter his remaining days. The Christian loves to tread in the footsteps of St. Paul, and to visit those underground hiding places, to which, perhaps, some of those early disciples, to whom he addressed his well-known letter, were accustomed to resort, and solace themselves with the consolations of the Gospel.

In studying the religious history of Italy, it is found that there has always been a *protesting* element among its people, more or less manifest to the world. By many it is believed that amongst the recesses of the Cottian Alps, from which I am now writing, there has always existed a remnant of these early Christians who received their doctrines direct from the apostles or their immediate successors. However this may be, it is certain that from the days of Savonarolo to those of Ugo Bassi, there has always been a strong anti-papal feeling in Italy, though none of those great men who avowed it in their speeches and writings, had the courage to break entirely their alliance with Rome, which has always succeeded in holding the consciences of men in spiritual thralldom.

The readers of Dr. McCrie's history of the Reformation will remember that three centuries ago there was quite an evangelical movement in Italy, many drawing room meetings being held for the reading of the Scriptures and prayer. Cardinal Pole and Contarini held the doctrine of justification by faith. Lucca was on the eve of declaring itself on the side of Protestantism when a combination of the pope and the Emperor of Germany crushed the movement. John Calvin was for a time a refugee in Ferrara. Michael Angelo in his old age is said to have been brought to acknowledge the truth; and several of the Oxford professors were refugees from Italy. But all these early movements originated with the higher classes of society. Recent revivals of religion have taken place amongst the lower classes. Thirty years ago the Bible found its way into the country, and meetings took place in secret to read it, imprisonment being the fate of those in whose possession a copy of the Scriptures was found. These meetings, when discovered, were broken up, and those who attended them were scattered throughout the country, carrying the Bible with them, and in this way diffusing the light of the Gospel over still wider areas.

The expulsion of the Austrians, the famous march of Garibaldi, the defeat of France, and the entrance of the troops of Victor Emmanuel into Rome, put an end to all these penal disabilities, opened Italy to the light, and to-day there is freedom, more or less perfect, to evangelize from the Alps to Etna. But still the people as a whole are largely indifferent, Popery exerts an enormous influence not only in this country, but all over the continent. Education is effecting some good, but still three-fourths of the people can neither read nor write. This ignorance is, of course, closely allied to superstition.

In previous letters I gave some particulars regarding the work of the Waldensians and other native Churches, in trying to overcome this superstition and ignorance and their attendant evils. In the present and one or two other letters my purpose is to call attention to certain rather isolated, but still very interesting efforts, put forth chiefly by individuals, seconded, of course, by Christian friends, and the results of which have been signally marked. I shall notice them in the order in which I visited the cities in which these efforts are carried on. And first let me preface one of them with a few sentences regarding

VENICE.

What makes Venice a unique city is that it alone in Europe, after the fall of the Roman Empire, remained a free city, and continued without interruption the government, manners, and spirit of the ancient republics. Venice, a colony of Padua, was saved in an inaccessible place from the ravages of Alaric and Attila.

The daughter grew up under the guidance of the mother, and then became independent. Continuing to develop what might be called a spontaneous life, Venetian society followed its own tastes and produced some original creations which to the present, from the mixed character of styles, are a puzzle to the architects of all countries. History tells how Venice continued to grow by conquest and commerce, and how from its situation between the Byzantine and Franconian empires, it became the connecting link between the trade of both and the great depot of the traffic between the east and the west, never submitting to any conqueror until it fell into the hands of the French in 1797. It had long before this, however, been in a tottering condition. Indeed it had reached the zenith of its glory at the close of the fifteenth century, when its inhabitants had attained the number of 200,000, and its wealth was something enormous. The capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453 was the first check to the progress of Venice, but the crowning blow was the discovery of a new sea route to India at the close of the century.

Although now connected with the mainland by the railway, and a few new streets have been opened in recent times, Venice remains essentially a city of the past, detached from the continent and presenting many features of eastern life. The most ancient of the palaces which line the Grand Canal as well as the Church of St. Mark with its cupolas and its mosaics, all carry the visitor, in spite of himself, to Constantinople. It is an eastern sun which is needed to bring out the beauty of the coloured marbles of the piazza of St. Mark, and of the balconies and porticos of the palaces which are still washed by the waters of the canals. Then again the mysterious silence and solitariness which reign are characteristic of the east. The sombre narrow little streets, into many of which the sun never penetrates, form with their perpetual windings a labyrinth from which it is as difficult to extricate oneself as the old streets of an Arab city. The canals of the lagoons with their scarcely moving waters reproduce the pensive feelings of the east; while the gondolas, with their black coverings, glide silently by the deserted palaces, and look like so many coffins carrying the dead to their last resting places. Everything wears a mournful aspect, which it requires a bright warm sun to dispel and render bearable. The appearance of the city even to-day corresponds with what tradition tells of the terrible and mysterious government which once weighed so heavily upon Venice, upon its magistrates, and even upon the Doge himself. After visiting the cells and dungeons near the Bridge of Sighs, one understands better the impression produced by the terror which the aristocracy, represented by the Council of Ten and the Council of Three, inspired. Anonymous accusations of police placed in the "mouth of the Lion," masked judges, secret instructions, condemnations executed by night and covered by an eternal silence—all this apparatus of an invisible and pitiless tyranny agrees with the general impression now made upon the visitor.

And yet it is not to be forgotten that Venice has always been a city of pleasure. It was not only strangers who came here from all parts of Europe to seek brilliant fêtes and happy adventures. The Venetians themselves always loved pleasure; they love it still, and manifest a pronounced taste for balls, theatres, music, and gayety of all kinds. For several weeks recently scarcely a night passed without serenaders spending hours on the Grand Canal singing and playing on various instruments in front of our hotel. And this leads me to say that many of the palaces which once belonged to the old aristocracy are now converted into hotels and pensions—the descendants of many of the former proprietors being next door to paupers. The representatives of some of the old patrician families still vegetate in their palaces on an income of two or three hundred pounds per annum. But what the Venetian patrician of to-day lacks in cash, he makes up in pride. His main expenditure is for a gondola, and the gondoliers do the work of the house when they are not rowing. Saving is said to be the sole enjoyment of Venetians. No matter how small their income, they manage to hoard a portion of it. Illustrative of the extent to which this passion is carried, a story is told to the effect that when they receive their friends on their weekly reception days—and each family has one at least—the lady of the house rings the bell and orders the gondolier to bring in coffee. He duly appears with a coffee-pot and cups; the hostess waves her hand and says: "No one will

take coffee," on which the guests bow, for they know from their own experience at home that this coffee is a mere complimentary expression, there being neither coffee in the pot nor sugar in the bowl.

While this is the condition of the aristocratic portion of the population, it does not take long to discover that amongst the mass of the people crowded in these narrow lanes—the present population is 132,826—the existence of a vast amount of poverty and wretchedness and vice, and the necessity there is for many

RAGGED INDUSTRIAL SCHOOLS

such as that commenced by Mrs. Hammond not quite three years ago, a brief account of which I shall now give. This lady, the widow of Capt. Hammond, who fell in the Crimea, and whose Christian work amongst his men, has been told in an interesting biography,—known to many readers of THE PRESBYTERIAN—was unexpectedly detained in Venice during the winter of 1880-81, and was anxious to know if there was any service she could render to the cause of her Master. While in this state of mind she heard Signor Bervatto, the pastor of the Free Italian Church, pray for the poor, idle, hungry boys in the streets, that the Lord would open a way of rescue for some of them from vice and misery. Taking this prayer as a message to her, the thought occurred, could she not start a ragged school where these poor boys might be fed and taught some manual work, as well as to read and write, and above all that that they might be led to know the Saviour. After earnest prayer and the surmounting of many difficulties, she succeeded in opening a school on the tenth of March, 1881, in the premises of the Free Italian Church. Twelve boys were admitted, the majority of them having lost at least one of their parents, and seven of them unable to read or write. It is scarcely necessary to say that these little fellows, whose clothing was of the scantiest, heartily enjoyed their first dinner of rice and beans. After being fed and freed from a superfluous crop of hair and dirt, the work of education began. The colporteur of the church offered his service two hours daily free of expense. He had been an army school master and a sergeant, and was just the person needed to reduce these boys to order by drilling and exercise promotive both of good health and discipline. A shoemaker was employed and the boys set to work with a big needle, twine and leather. Those having an aptitude for this work got on well; others began the trade of a carpenter, a place for a bench having been found, and an instructor secured. The younger ones were taught to make card-board boxes for shops. Meanwhile Mr. Bervatto tried to make known to these young Arabs, the simplest truths of the Word of God. Soon the news of all this came to the ears of the Roman priests; and the patriarch or Archbishop of Venice preached a special sermon against it, while the Lenten preachers uttered anathemas against "that infernal school." A few weeks after the priests of an adjoining parish opened a room where food was offered three times a day, without any instruction, to all boys who would promise never to enter the Lere-tical school. In this way some of the boys were enticed away; but after three weeks, through lack of funds or some other cause, the room was closed, and the boys had to seek food elsewhere. Mrs. Hammond relates many instances, illustrative of the bitter animosity of the priests against the Gospel, but I can only find room for one showing how the papal system acts on the superstitious fears of the people, viz: Bervatto discovered one day in a garret, crouching amongst some rags and straw, two pretty delicate looking boys, descended from an ancient and illustrious family, from which four Doges had been elected. These little fellows had not been out of the garret for more than five months, as they had no clothes in which they could decently appear in the street. The father—a widower—had sunk from one degree of poverty to another, until he and his two boys were on the point of starvation. He eagerly accepted the offer to take these into the school, gave the certificates of their baptism to Signor Bervatto, and signed a paper saying he would not take them away again. This took place on a Friday afternoon; two suits of clothes promptly made enabled them to appear with the other boys at the Sabbath school, where their pale faces were touching to see. On Monday they came again, sat with the others in the class and enjoyed their food. The next morning, however, a messenger came, bringing back the clothes, and a note from the father to say he dared not continue to send the children, as