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-THE PERIL OF VENICE IN WAR TIME-

Being Fortified, It Becomes a Legitimate Prey of Enemy, With a Naval Base 100 Miles Away

The question which is chiefly agitating Italians who really care, for the beautiful is, "what will happen to Venice?" writes George B. McClellan, in the N. Y. Times.

It is a question which is of the deepest interest, not only to all art-loving Italians, but to all intelligent foreigners who have visited Venice, or read of her, or even heard of her.

There is an old saying that if you are anxious to find any one in particular, it is only necessary to sit at a table in front of Florian's, on Piazza San Marco, in Venice, and wait. Sooner or later your man will come.

A visit to Venice has become an essential part of a liberal education. Every man and woman who can afford the time and money makes a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Mark. And, having once seen Venice, goes back, again and again, as often and for as long as possible, drawn by what she contains and by what she is, by her pictures and sculpture and architecture, by her beauty and her charm.

For Venice has a beauty absolutely unlike that of any other city, an irresistible charm that is exclusively her own. Her beauty and her charm are so different from anything else we know, so compelling and gripping, that Venice sometimes seems unreal, a place of wondrous fantasies, a dream city destined to vanish when we wake, too marvelous to be true.

To all the horrors piled upon horrors that the war has produced, a new one has been added in the thought that Venice may be destroyed.

Those of us who love her must ac custom ourselves to facing the certainty that the coming of war will in all likelihood mean the passing of the Venice that has meant so much to us, that we may never see her again as we last saw her, never feel again the influence of her spirit, never know again the Venice we once knew.

For many, Venice lost much of her attraction twenty years ago when she first became the goal of every visitor to Italy, and when the authorities began to preserve her monuments. She was rapidly crumbling to pieces, scarcely visited except by a few, who had the city almost to themselves. Venice was dying slowly but surely. Her population was wretchedly poor and growing less every year, while her most important buildings threatened to collapse at any moment.

At about that time when the tourists began to flock to Venice in great numbers, the Italian Government at last awoke to the necessity of doing something to save their most beautiful city from economic and physical destruction. Efficiently aided by the municipality the national authorities undertook the task of regeneration. Local industries were fostered, capitalists were encouraged to invest in industrial enterprises. Mills and factories sprang up and large hotels were built on the Lido. Venice became a manufacturing town of sorts, and not only a great sightseers' resort, but the most popular summer resort in the Kingdom.

Under the admirable administration of Conte Guinani, who for years has been the Sindaco, or Mayor, the work of physical conservation and improvement was begun. The fall of the Campanile gave the needed impulse, for it proved that there was scarcely a building in the city in any better condition. Wholesale restoration has been going on ever since with great restraint and in great good taste. The Sindaco has also cleaned out most of the slums, tearing down their filthy rookeries, which were neither picturesque nor of any historic interest, and replacing them with very inoffensive modern workmen's houses. When the war broke out last August Venice had become a healthy and a prosperous town. A year ago Venice was one of the cleanest, most prosperous, and most contented cities in Italy, besides being the most beautiful city in the world.

To-day all this is changed. The tourists, who brought her much of her wealth, are gone, and most of her hotels are closed. Her arsenal expected, nearly all her factories have shut down, her industries are at a standstill, her people, mostly unemployed, are suffering terribly for the very necessities of life. From being better off than at any time since the old days of the republic, the war has brought them to the lowest ebb of their fortunes. Their poverty is very great and very pitiful.

At first blush it seems almost past belief that under any circumstances the central empires either would or could bring themselves to injure the city which Germans care for even more than do most Americans. There

can be no question that they would respect her had they been given any option in the matter.

Venice is absolutely unique, for once destroyed or even injured, she never can be made again. There can be no reconstruction of her buildings, no remodelling of her canals. If once thrown down she will be lost to the world forever, for the men who made her are dead and have carried with them the secret of her charm.

She belongs, as she always has, to those who care for her, that is to all the nations of the earth, and yet Italy has treated her as a mere incident in the military game, as of no more consequence than Spezia or Cherbourg or Liverpool, as a town like any other, to be defended and fortified or not as the spirit or the whim of the General Staff may decree.

The attitude of most Italians on the subject is resentful of outside interference or suggestion. They say that, as Venice belongs to Italy, that ends the matter. It is for Italy to do with Venice what she pleases, and it is no one's business but Italy's what becomes of the world's fairest city.

Shortly after 1870 the Italian Government determined to organize a military base upon the Adriatic. The logical selection would have been Ancona, with its safe anchorage, its easily defensible headlands, its central position, and its freedom from valuable possessions in case of attack. But Venice had been recently required from Austria, and there was more or less discontent among her people. Some of them had opposed annexation, while others believed that if the new kingdom had made enough effort annexation might have come sooner.

It was thought necessary to placate the Venetians, besides there was the sentimental consideration, for many Italians, with more sentiment than sense, clamored for the resurrection of the dead republic's naval glory. In other words, Venice had a "pull" and Ancona had none. So Venice, though chosen, while Ancona the fit was ignored.

The work of making Venice a naval station was at once begun, although her little harbor is much too small to shelter modern war vessels, and the lack of water off shore has made the construction of an artificial harbor impossible. To help the economic development of the city, as well as for political reasons, the old arsenal of the republic was modernized, and is now being run at full blast. There is also a very pretentious naval shipyard, in which certain large war vessels are being built, an aviation station, and a powder factory, besides all of which great stores have been accumulated of war material, of arms and ammunition.

The outlying Lido, or sand dunes, have been strongly fortified, and with in a few weeks additional great guns have been placed, making of the city a considerable fortress of very great value, almost security, from an enemy.

Had Venice been left as she was, under the laws of war as an open and undefended port, she would have been free from attack by land and sea, besides an enemy would have no possible object nor excuse for attacking her. To-day, because of her valuable military stores, her ships in the building and fortifications, no enemy would have any excuse for leaving her alone.

In case of sudden attack from the sea reliance must be placed entirely on the land batteries, for the Italian fleet will not be immediately available. The harbor is so small, and its two entrances so narrow and twisting, that even the few light cruisers it might contain would be obliged to leave port one by one, at half speed, easy victims for an enemy's squadron lying in wait. The shore is so shelving that outside there is no safe anchorage within three or four miles of land, where, anchored in deep water, an Italian squadron would be at the mercy of hostile submarines. Any Italian squadron intended for the defence of Venice would have to be at Ancona, the nearest safe harbor, a hundred and fifty miles away.

What Venice has to fear is not so much a siege as a sudden raid from Pola, the great Austrian naval base, but little over a hundred miles distant. If on a dark night an Austrian squadron succeeded in crossing the Adriatic, it would have only the shore batteries on the Lido to deal with, for it would require from eight to ten hours before help could reach Venice from Ancona.

A chance shell falling in Piazza San Marco or a bomb from an aeroplane would work irreparable injury. The churches and palaces of Venice are

things of shreds and patches, almost as unstable as card houses, ready to fall under the lightest strain. The authorities have surrounded the city with legitimate targets for shell fire.

The dockyard and arsenal are in the northern part of the city, the naval anchorage at the south, close to the shore; the aviation station and powder magazines lie behind to the west while directly in to the east, about five miles from San Marco, are the shore batteries. In the middle of all rises the Campanile, serving as an excellent range-finder and target for ship lying or steaming off shore. Half a dozen shells intended, with the best will in the world, for the arsenal, or anchorage, or aviation station, or powder magazines, or even for the shore batteries, but dropping at haphazard in or about San Marco, would literally destroy the city.

In trying to make a Venice a little Toulon, Italy has not only invited attack, but has made attack almost inevitable. Austria-Hungary cannot afford to allow Italy to maintain one of her three largest naval bases (Spezia and Taranto being the others) within a few miles of Austro-Hungarian territory without at least trying to destroy it.

By surrounding the city on every side with universally accepted objects of attack, Italy has made it almost impossible for an enemy to avoid inflicting Venice in the effort to destroy her defense. Should anything happen to Venice, as is altogether probable, there will be, undoubtedly, a feeling of consternation and horror among all the peoples of the earth, a feeling which will be shared and loudly expressed by the Italians themselves. We shall hear from Italians themselves. We shall hear from Italy of the dreadful atrocities of "I Hunt" and of their brutal and unnecessary destruction of Italy's most priceless possession.

But before we voice our horror and denounce the Austrians as vandals, let us in common fairness remember that if Venice suffers it will be Italy who has been at fault, for Italy will not only have invited, but will have forced, Austria to attack.

It will doubtless be urged that come what may Austria-Hungary should leave Venice alone. Unfortunately war is a serious and grim business, in which neither sentiment nor love of art have any share. Austria proposes to win, if it is humanly possible to do so. If Venice suffers in the effort, Italy and not Austria will be to blame.

Yet this is a very poor consolation for the rest of the world, for, no matter where the blame may lie, the loss of Venice will fall equally upon our civilization.

Now that it is too late, the authorities are making feverish and pitiful efforts to safeguard some few of the treasures of Venice. But, while the pictures in the Academia and in some of the churches have been removed, the ceilings and the buildings remain. The time when the protection of Venice should have been undertaken was long ago, when Italy began to fortify the Venetian Lagoon. An international protest against fortification might, perhaps, have been of some avail; now it is too late.

If Italy were to be the only sufferer by her strangely shortsighted policy, no great harm would be done, and she would be entitled to no sympathy. But the world must suffer because of Italy's mistake. The blame will be entirely hers, but the consequences of her error must be shared by all.

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