



SANTA MARIA DELLA SALUTE, AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE GRAND CANAL.

BEING STRAY NOTES OF FIVE YEARS OF TRAVEL.

By WINIFRED H. LEYS, AUCKLAND.

VENICE: THE DREAM CITY.

VENEZIA, Venice, Venedig, Venice! In every tongue and every land she has called to the romantic during long centuries, and all have heard; and on those who come to-day to view her departing glories, the people of poor decaying Venice live.

Every artist wants to tread her streets and watch her golden sailed barches come up from the lagoons, and her dark gondolas dart here and there; every poet longs to peer into her mysterious canals and crumbling palaces, and read the romance of her bygone days; every historian desires to stand in her Grand Piazza, for here, indeed, has a nation risen and sunk to nothingness; and every tourist goes because Venice is the most touristic city in all Europe. All come, some once, some twice, some many times. The first time I saw Venice was years ago; I have been again, and some day I hope to go once more, for she holds a great fascination—a fascination of the life of to-day so strangely blended with the memory of bygone splendour.

Before my second visit to Venice some friend presented me with a copy of the "Stones of Venice," by Ruskin, for which I was most grateful, feeling that, as I was to have the privilege of a second visit, I ought to enter more seriously into the chief beauties and interests of the famous city. I struggled manfully with this wonderful work, but I may as well confess that my effort to see Venice through another's eyes was a complete failure. I was so bewildered by the minuteness of the detailed descriptions, by the artistic and architectural knowledge Ruskin displays, and so disgusted with my own ignorance, that I well nigh became estranged from the old city. Ruskin's eyes were very different to those of the dear old English artist who, on my first visit, had taught me to love the churches and pictures of Venice. There is no doubt I was growing bewildered by beauties I could not appreciate and losing sight of those I understood. After spending half one morning in St. Mark's, where the radiant walls of fresco and

mosaic are much too absorbing in their entirety to be taken in detail, I read Ruskin's chapters about that gorgeous old church, and then I understood that these printed stones were beyond me; so I shut the book, and with all my ignorance, I went out to tread the stones themselves, and see through my own eyes her beauties, and feel the influence and charm in such things as appealed to me most.

How much romantic writing has been

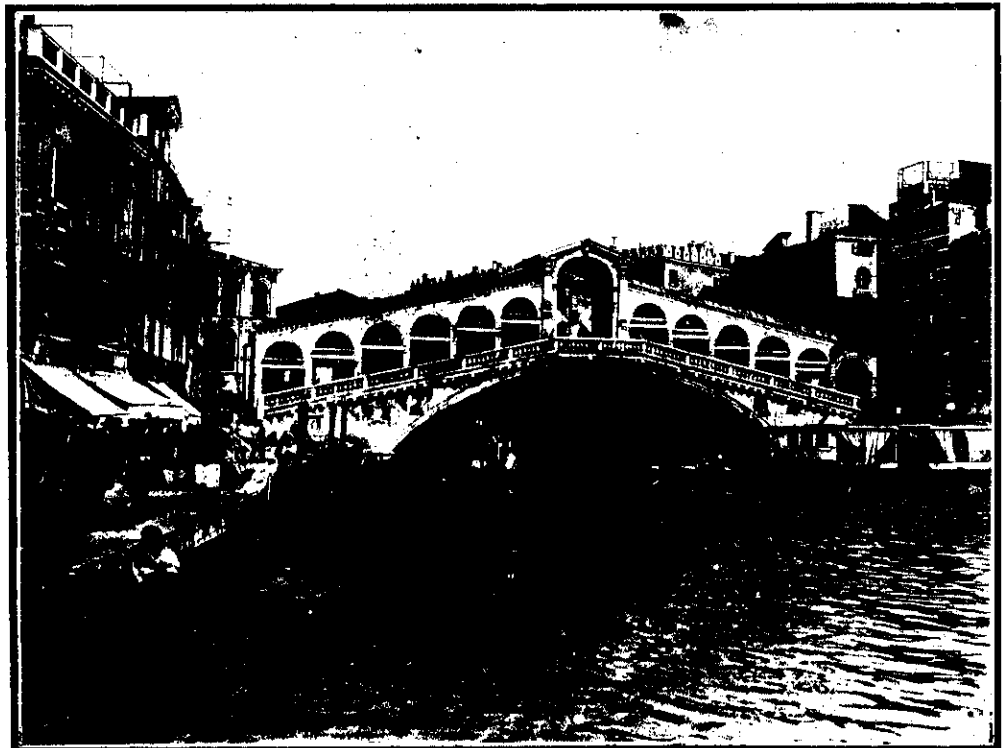
expended on the wealth and attendant extravagances of the days of the Doges; but honestly it is very hard, at first, amid that sadness of decay that casts a shadow over Venice, to picture a time when the mad joy of the carnival lasted six months of the year. Venice is not a laughing, merry city. Rather is she a sad one—affecting in much the same way as a song of the days that are no more.

Our eyes grow wide with a contemplative wonder as we lie back in a gon-

dola, and go swinging round the corners of narrow and darkened canals, past closed and decaying palaces, each stately even now in the memory of one time greatness, or stroll along those tortuous lanes and across a busy campo, where the old men and women sell great pieces of hot pumpkin and roasted chestnuts, where fishermen skin and scale and cry their wares, while pedlars sell cards of tape and buttons and reels, etc., where fresh vegetables from the mainland and the gardens of the Lido are displayed for sale on raised stalls, and where, in the centre of all this, is the public well to which many come for water.

During the summer months Venice is rather stifling, while in the winter cold damp winds make one shiver; but when come the delightfully warm and sunny days of spring or autumn a few weeks spent in the old dream city will give you memories as full of sweetness as the memory of a dream. The long days are spent in the churches, in the Academy of Fine Arts, in the streets, out by the Lido, watching the great billows break on the shore of the Adriatic, or perhaps on a trip to Chioggia, to see the fishing boats, with their gorgeous sails. Similar things might occupy our days in other Italian cities, but Venice has, owing to her great water-barrier, remained untouched by the habit of any other city, and so offers sights and sounds as unique as if her clustered islands were a thousand miles from anywhere.

I do not think that it is quite reasonable to expect a visitor from this corner of the world, who has never seen a single example of the works of the old masters, to feel at first anything but bewilderment at the miles of European galleries. Unless he be an artist, these things have not entered into his thoughts to an extent that would give him a knowledge of the periods at which the pictures were painted, or enable him at a glance to follow the steady forward march of art century by century. The thought of endeavouring to classify the various artists, and even dimly understand their diverse methods seems too great a task to one who will only be with them for a few months. But I have often wondered if anyone could spend even a few weeks in Italy, the real home of art, without absorbing some of the artistic spirit that pervades her cities. I really believe that the dullest of us would do it unwittingly—because we must. We cannot help it in Italy, for the love and the thought of art is in the very air we breathe; the poorest Italian artisan is as familiar with the names of the great artists that have dwelt in this city, as with the names



THE PONTE DI RIALTO, ACROSS THE GRAND CANAL.