

# Foreword

ITALY has long lived upon her past. Even the late efforts of Mussolini were given the colour of history by the stress that was laid upon the Roman character of the new Italy. This backward-looking habit has long lain like a blight upon the country, and it is a blight that lies the thicker because that past was one of the most splendid in the world.

Venice, now but a second-class port that stands no longer, as once it did, on the cross-roads of world commerce, has a past in its own way almost as great as that of Rome, and a story which, since it happened so much nearer our own times, is more real, more human and colourful than the rather distant glories of the Augustan age.

The name still has a magic to draw men's minds and though the glory is departed the charm lives on. Venice, no longer Queen of the Adriatic, is still married to the sea, inviting it almost within her doors. And the sea, in return, has given the town a unique and lasting charm.

It was no empty ceremony that launched the Bucentaur, the State Barge of the Doges, which each year on Ascension Day bore the ruler of Venice to renew the city's marriage to the sea, for Venice was not only built upon the water, but depended on it for her riches and her influence in the Councils of the World. Her high-roads were all of water, and her possessions, scattered far and wide, had no connecting links save those of the sea. And it was not until the merchant adventurers of the countries that fringe the Atlantic had found other and securer ways to India and the East, and had discovered the Americas that she lost her pre-eminence in sea-borne trade. Sea commerce had raised her to a position and a wealth unparalleled in history. And when sea-commerce deserted her

she sank imperceptibly but inevitably into decline. In recent years a new port built at Marghera, on the nearby mainland, has injected fresh saline into the city's arteries, and her population has grown from 147,000 in 1920 to 250,000 in 1940. It seems that even if the pre-eminence of the old Republic is gone for ever, Venice has a future. But the visitor, rightly, thinks only of her past.

The past greatness of Venice was founded on the fact that she was situated at a point where the sea-routes from the Levant could conveniently join with the great land-routes through the passes of the Alps. Genoa and Pisa, similarly situated with regard to the Western passes, had a similar opportunity for trade, and in consequence were Venice's chief rivals. In those days, when the Cape Route to India and the Spice Islands was not thought of, European trade with the East flowed, of necessity, through these two channels. Venice took every advantage of her fortunate position. Her people, bred in a bracing climate, established a form of government so firm and stable that it became the admiration of the world. The opportunities for adventure in her fleets saved her from the feud and faction that so often destroyed the power and prosperity of the cities of the mainland, and her connection with the Byzantine Empire has given a distinctive stamp to her architecture.

This bulletin will attempt to give the soldier on leave a background against which what he sees will take on meaning and proportion. For the detail of the various buildings and galleries a guide-book is necessary. This is not a guide-book. It is rather an aid to the understanding of a town which is very much a living whole and which must be comprehended as such to be appreciated.