

Versuch eines III

THE
CAMORRA IN VENICE

« DE CHI MI FIDO GWARDAMI IDDIO
DE CHI NO MI FIDO ME GWARDARÒ IO. »

(Old Venetian Inscription)

WILLIAM SCOTT

Venice, February 1888,

AT THE LIDO — VENICE
Grand Bathing Establishment

The Bathing Establishment at the Lido is one of the most famous in Europe.

Steamers cross from Venice in about twelve minutes, starting every quarter of an hour, and passing over one of the most pleasing portions of the Lagoon.

The island of the Lido has splendid vegetation and has a magnificent view of the Adriatic. All the conveniences of life are to be found at moderate prices. Châlets for families, and furnished rooms for single individuals, can be secured by telegram or letter.

In the Establishment — which is the only one on the Sea — there is a vast Saloon for concerts, lounging, or refreshment.

The great covered terrace facing the sea is one of the great attractions for travellers.

GRAND BATHING ESTABLISHMENT
AT THE LIDO — VENICE

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THE
CAMORRA IN VENICE

BY
WILLIAM SCOTT

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VENICE, 1888.

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PALAZZO REZZONICO, VENICE.

Feb. 1888.

ORIGIN OF THE CAMORRA.

ENICE has long been under the imputation of harbouring a dishonest association called the Camorra; an association the scope of which is to draw all foreign visitors into its clutches for the purpose of spoliation. Italy was for ages considered the especial home of brigandage, and travellers' stories used to abound in thrilling accounts of captures, escapes, sufferings or ransoms. Of course strangers were the principal victims, and for two chief reasons; firstly: — because being able to afford the expense of travel in those days they were reasonably supposed to be rich; secondly: — because, being foreigners they were not likely to find friends among the authorities, and so provoke a reaction against their captors.

The progress of civilization, and, still more, the unification of Italy under a constitutional government, has rendered necessary the more or less

complete suppression of brigandage accompanied by personal violence ; but the love of gain without labour, the charms of the *dolce far niente*, the conviction that all travellers must be rich — or they would not travel — and the ineradicable impression that foreigners are fair game for plunder, remain as firmly rooted as ever, and quite undisturbed by the march of a much-vaunted *civiltà*.

Seeing then that the old means of personal violence were no longer available; that the concourse of foreigners was ever on the increase; and that these continued to spend large sums of money in purchasing the artistic products for which the country is famous, — the immoral desire for an unjust gain found its natural sphere of action in the ordinary channels of commercial enterprise. Like the brigands of former times the modern conspirators have been and are in a decided minority among the mercantile classes of the population, and their designs had small chance of success so long as there existed that free competition which is the life-blood of genuine business in all countries where true economic principles are understood and acted upon. So long as customers were free to go where they found the best treatment, the lowest prices, the most perfect goods, there was little fear of continued fraud, of very extravagant profits, and all those petty knaveries which mark the immoral

business transactions of today; and therefore the first aim of the conspirators was necessarily the suppression of competition, in order to gather all business into their own hands. Add to this the tendency, indisputably marking Southern nations, to wait for business to come voluntarily or be brought to the dealer by other persons, instead of the dealer energetically going in search of business and himself creating a demand for his wares, — and we have the two leading principles of the institution now known as the Camorra.

The chief if not the only practical methods for suppressing competition in trade are: — the bribing of rivals to withhold their competition in consideration of a compensation to be agreed upon; and: — the impeding of access on the part of probable purchasers to any establishments not belonging to the conspirators.

The former of these methods must usually be of a limited application, for obvious economic reasons; though it has been adopted on a considerable scale during the last few years by one of the most prominent Venetian manufacturers, thereby enabling him to secure an almost absolute monopoly in his particular branch of industry, to the evident disadvantage of purchasers, who are thus compelled to supply the extravagant profits which he exacts, and are the more easily beguiled by the

« fixed prices » which he is able to put upon his goods, and to vaunt as a proof of unquestionable honesty.

The latter of the methods above mentioned, less expensive and equally effective, even if more troublesome in practice, is carried out by means of an agreement between the conspiring dealers or shopkeepers on the one hand, and those persons with whom the foreign traveller is especially brought into contact — for advice, assistance, or service — on the other hand. These of course consist principally of the Proprietors, Managers, Porters and other servants in the Hotels; the recognized Guides or Interpreters; the touts, messengers, porters, or *valets-de-place*; and the Gondoliers and boatmen, who here in Venice entirely take the place occupied by cabmen and coachmen in other cities. This agreement consists in a promise and undertaking on the part of these individuals to recommend, and conduct visitors to, only the shops or establishments of the conspirators; in return for which conduct the said conspirators promise and engage to pay to each and every individual who shall in any way render assistance towards the procuring of business a considerable percentage upon the amount spent by purchasers. So far the arrangement only bears the aspect of a simple commercial agreement such as those which are tacitly recognized every

where; but this by itself would not necessarily suffice to entirely suppress competition, for the ordinary means of publicity would yet remain open to all rivals, and buyers could still go where they pleased. Thus arose the necessity for other means being taken by each of the parties to the contract, namely: — on the part of the conspiring agents or touts, a system of persistent denunciation and discrediting of all firms not forming part of the conspiracy; deliberate false statements with regard to character, business, address, goods, prices, and what not; and often a positive refusal to conduct or accompany visitors to these establishments. Then on the part of the conspiring tradesmen: — a system of bribing on a large scale regardless of business actually done; loans of considerable sums of money which need never be repaid; presents of money, jewellery, or other articles; payments at a liberal rate for merely taking visitors to their shops whether purchases were made or not; and even constant heavy wages or retaining-fees to touts and guides; besides wholesale and almost indiscriminate « tips », « drinks », and « treating », while members of the legal profession were to be seen publicly « hobnobbing » in drink-shops with men belonging to the lowest classes in order to secure their co-operation.

As may be imagined, these extraordinary

expenses could not be sustained out of the ordinary and legitimate profits even of large transactions, and in consequence a still further step became necessary, this time on the part of the conspiring dealers only. This step consisted in the exacting of enormous and therefore dishonest prices, a proceeding only rendered possible by the absence of competition ; the substitution of inferior goods and materials ; and, in fact, the establishment of a system of swindling and dishonesty which is probably without a parallel in the annals of commercial enterprise. This organization in its complete development is known as the Camorra.

It is impossible to fix any exact date for the commencement of a system which, as we have shewn, has been of gradual growth, one phase succeeding another as required or suggested by the exigencies of the conspiracy, but it was distinctly recognized about twenty years ago, and attention was called to the fact of its existence, when, on the dissolution of a certain firm owing to the death of the principal partner, it was found that the outstanding accounts included an amount of some 20,000 francs which had been loaned to various guides, and which of course was never repaid.

The latter period, which has seen the establishment of wholesale swindling, the selling of copper for gold, the spedition of objects inferior

in size and value to those bought and paid for, may be said to date from about ten years ago, when a few unprincipled speculators — some of whom are even said to have previously made the acquaintance of prison cells for dishonesty and forgery — plunged into the trade in Venetian specialities; and by means of the bribes, commissions, loans, and presents which they lavished, a number of ignorant and unscrupulous men of the lower classes became rich in a very short space of time, passing upward from one position to another, till it is a notorious fact that a porter in one of the principal hotels, in league with the Camorra, was last year able to lend 80,000 francs to the proprietors of the hotel, and has himself since become part proprietor of the same. It has also been stated on very high authority that during last year alone one of the touts on the Piazza, whose name is known, obtained in commissions, retaining fees and perquisites a sum of more than 20,000 francs, all of which was of course, filched from the pockets of unsuspecting foreigners by means of the camorra.



ACTION OF THE CAMORRA.



THE PLAN of action followed by the Camorra may be briefly outlined as follows:

During the visitors' season some of the largest firms employ a smart, well-dressed, representative, speaking one or more foreign languages, to travel up and down that part of the railway nearest Venice, for the purpose of getting into conversation with travellers approaching the city for the first time, and introducing the subject of Venetian art-manufacture. This individual of course carefully hides his real character; often pretending to be a tourist himself, but one who knows the city well, and with every appearance of genuine disinterestedness he proffers information likely to interest a traveller. It is easy to draw attention to the once famous manufacture of glassware and mosaic, and as, in the expressive words of the Venetian proverb, « every psalm finishes with a *Gloria*, » so the

pretended tourist concludes by a recommendation of some particular firm or factory as being the most trustworthy, the most reasonable in its charges, and so on. Occasionally this agent or one of his companions takes his place at the *table d'hôte* of the Hotel, to continue and complete the work thus begun. Sometimes pretending to be a leisured resident of Venice he offers to escort his new acquaintances among the sights of the city, and he may be seen accompanying these unsuspecting victims to the Accademia, the Ducal Palace, or to S. Mark's, and discoursing with glib assurance of the objects of interest therein contained, not omitting the suggestion of a visit to the glass furnaces of Murano, or the showrooms of some mosaic worker in the city; while in return for his kind attentions he is entertained at the Hotel as a benefactor and friend.

In more ordinary cases a foreigner arrives at the Hotel and has hardly taken his room when a servant puts into his hands the business card of one or other of the camorristi with glowing eulogies of that firm's honesty and fair-dealing, the lowness of its prices, and even — as if it were a recommendation — the monopoly it is said to enjoy in certain branches of art production. Descending to the Hall, the Manager and Porter present similar indications. If an appeal be made to the Proprietor for his opinion the answer is always

in substance the same. « The only respectable house. » Next morning a servant knocks at the visitor's door. — « A gentleman wishes to see you. » « A representative of the favoured firm is waiting to conduct you to their establishment. » If a guide be employed the conversation is always turned to the subject of specialities and manufactures, glass works, show rooms, mosaic, and so forth. The route is sure to be chosen so as to lead past some camorristic place of business, and the opportunity for a visit insisted on. If the visitor enquires for the firms whose names have long been an honour to Venetian art he is told that they are no longer in business, that they have become bankrupt, that they are in prison for some dishonest action, that in fact they are dead, and that there is no use in thinking about them any more. Sometimes the foreigner is unconvinced and insists upon finding out the shop of a certain dealer. The resources of the camorristi are not exhausted. He is taken to a place where the name of the dealer he is seeking is openly exposed, though that individual has no manner of connection with the business carried on in his name. This has happened especially in connection with Dr. Salviati whose name is well-known all over Europe, and who is often enquired for. Gondoliers usually say that he is dead, though fortunately there is no foundation for the statement.

Perhaps the visitor, trusting to Murray or Baedeker, prefers to wander alone around the Piazza. At the doors of S. Mark's he is assailed by loafing idlers who follow him into the church and in spite of protests and refusals begin a description of the mosaics. In sheer weariness and disgust he yields and pays the fee exacted in order to be rid of the nuisance. It is not yet at an end though, for the tout having sought to arouse an interest in the mosaics insinuates that hard by there is a factory where such things are made. It is now eleven o'clock. The factory closes at noon. There is just time to visit it! Will not the traveller go? For two pence the tout is willing to shew him all the mysteries of the craft. No other expense. Free entrance. No obligation to buy anything. He yields. He is taken to a miserable sham factory where he is pestered and worried into buying, for perhaps 3 francs some trifle only worth a third of that price. He pays the tout two pence; he is bothered for a « drink » or a cigar in addition. The tout receives from the shopkeeper a franc or more as a commission, and returns to pester other travellers.

Under the *Procuratie*, that favourite lounge of all travellers in times gone by — alas! favourite no longer now — there is a regularly organised system of *accalapiatori*, « catchers, » belonging to three or four firms which possess far more than

that number of shops. These « catchers » start out of their hiding places at the first sight of a foreigner; attach themselves like leeches and give him no peace till he yields to their suggestion to visit the « Great manufactory of glass and mosaic; more than a hundred workmen constantly employed; the only one in Venice; » and a score of other equally false pretensions. « It would be advisable to go to day, for the factory is now open, and it can only be visited on one day in a week. » Or, « the factory closes at two o'clock it is now noon, there is just time. The tout pulls from his pocket a bit of gilt glass as a specimen, or some trifling article of mosaic work, and generally succeeds in deluding his victim. Arrived in the saloons of the camorristic firm the visitor soon discovers that the factory is a mere sham; but the practised rhetoric of the salesmen induces him to look round the show rooms, and he is pestered into buying something. Of course upon his expenditure the tout gets a heavy commission; but these men are paid regular weekly wages and often succeed in leading — or misleading — twenty or thirty families a day into the clutches of the shopkeepers. They have a whole system of signs known among themselves, and pass on information from one to the other round the Piazza when a foreigner is sighted, so that it is quite impossible to escape their annoying attentions.

Disgusted with the streets, the visitor gets into a gondola and indicates his wish to be taken to some distant church. He has not gone far when his attention is called to some flaming signboard of a « manufactory » or antiquity store. He does not wish to go there, and he says so, as plainly as his imperfect knowledge of the language will let him, but his protests are useless. The gondola approaches the doorway; and there appears a suave-mannered shopman who will escort him round the establishment. *Entrée Libre*; no obligation to buy. He yields. The gondolier receives a franc or more and settles himself for a half hour's smoke. The half hour is wasted; the visitor is induced to buy, say a gold scarf pin, at a high price. The gondolier receives a commission on the sale; and after having left Venice the traveller finds that the pin is of *copper* gilt.

Not many weeks ago two English ladies who were staying on a visit to some friends here got into a gondola and ordered the gondolier to conduct them to the show-rooms of the Venice and Murano Glass Company. They were taken instead to Testolini's establishment, and the gondolier could not be induced to go further, so that these ladies were compelled to leave the gondola and return home on foot to avoid further annoyance.

A French gentleman and his wife and little

daughter were feeding the pigeons on the Piazza. Suddenly the child was missed, and the parents horror-struck began a search for her. In a few moments she emerged loaded with bonbons from a confectioner's shop close by, whither she had been inveigled by a partner in one of the camorristic firms on the Piazza. Of course, thanks, compliments and explanations followed; the tradesman was in his turn invited to refreshments at the confectioner's, and the French gentleman and his spouse were afterwards « invited » to visit the establishment of Messrs: — where the usual performance was gone through.

A certain shop on the Piazza has an arrangement by which in passing through a narrow doorway leading from one part of the establishment to another the visitor shall innocently be the means of knocking down a piece of glass which of course is shivered in pieces. He offers to pay. His offer is courteously refused with profuse assertions that the affair is of no importance. He naturally dislikes to take advantage of this seeming generosity, and purchases some article or other.

Another firm, also having sale-rooms on the Piazza, is in the habit of substituting inferior articles for those bought and paid for. *Emballage garanti* is an attractive expression in an advertisement, so a foreigner buys some object or set of

objects, pays for the same; orders them to be packed carefully and sent to his address in London, New York, or elsewhere. After great delay he receives articles entirely different from, and of course very inferior to, those he purchased. On one occasion a foreigner purchased a glass chandelier and paid for the same. Another one was substituted, not only smaller, but also broken. The shopman protested to his employer that the fraud would be discovered. « We will say it was broken in transit » replied this champion of the Camorra; and the shopman obeyed his master's orders, but with charming ingenuousness *wrapped up the broken pieces separately*, so that the trick was found out.

Another form of deception consists in selling the work of an artist of considerable ability and then substituting a copy by some inferior workman. A short time ago one of the principal wood-carvers here, not being able to dispose of his goods as usual owing to the suppression of competition and the fact that visitors were kept away from his establishment by the false insinuations of the camorra's agents, consigned several carved figures to one of the principal camorristi for sale on commission. He was able to obtain precise information that these figures had been sold, and was even made aware of the names and addresses of

the individuals who had purchased them ; so at the close of the season he requested from the shopkeeper in question a settlement of the accounts. « What accounts ? We have not sold your figures ! there they are ! » *The figures had been sold, but copies had been substituted and sent away in their stead, while the artist's signature had been forged !*



REACTION.

FOR YEARS past the chief guide-books of other countries have warned travellers to beware of shopping in company with a guide or *valet-de-place*, and the foreign press has also raised an indignant protest against the infamous practices of the Camorristi; but the whole extent of the evil has not been appreciated till recently. The Italian press has now and then made spasmodic efforts to remedy matters, but these efforts have always been speedily extinguished for one reason or another; the chief one adduced being that by exposing the evil habits of some half dozen shopkeepers, and the conspiracy between them and their agents in the other classes of society, an unfavourable impression would be produced abroad, and foreigners would cease to spend their money in Venice as formerly. This shortsighted policy brought its own condemnation, for it

tacitly encouraged the conspirators to continue their malpractices, and displayed indisputably the fact that these journalists cared more for the pecuniary success of their fellow-townsmen than for their honesty or goodname. The authorities deplored the evil, but found no means suitable for combatting it; the honest shopkeepers endeavoured to form a counter association, and found to their cost that their work was being directed by one of the most potent supporters of the mischief, in the form of a lawyer related to the principal Camorristi. The fact is, no one was found who really possessed the combination of energy, courage, and honesty necessary for undertaking the difficult and unenviable task until the Autumn of last year, when Prof. Giuseppe Ottolenghi who had for a long time been preparing his work entitled: *Un imbecille nella Società Veneziana*, in which he treats of Venetian habits and customs, but which was a work of such size and importance as to require a considerable amount of time and expense for its production, determined to publish in pamphlet form one of the most important chapters, namely that which treated of the *Camorra nelle industrie Veneziane*. Known to all Venice as a clever and pungent writer, the mere announcement of his pamphlet sufficed to arouse immense interest, and offers to purchase the manuscript were made, with

the object of preventing its publication. The rough frankness with which he pointed out the plague-spot, the gravity of the evils which he denounced, the publication of certain names as those of firms acting in an indefensible manner, all combined to provoke a movement which but for him might never have found a champion. No one had ever before ventured to publish openly all the accusations made in that pamphlet, and to it therefore to and its author is undoubtedly due all the credit of initiating the present war against the Camorra. Without his daring exposure of facts matters might have gone on from bad to worse till Venice was commercially ruined : for foreigners were being warned by their own public press, as well as by those travellers who had already been victimised, and there was every probability that in simple self-defence visitors would for the future abstain from making any purchases of importance, thus condemning all alike, honest as well as dishonest, to pecuniary loss and perhaps ruin ; for it is an indisputable fact that the greater part of Venetian trade depends entirely upon the patronage of foreigners.

As a confirmation of our own statements we will translate a few pages from Prof. Ottolenghi's pamphlet. He says ; —

« Having proposed to ourselves to enter into

Italian life in order to study its crudest reality, the greatest possible clearness becomes an irresistible duty.

« Let us, then, see in what the swindling consists.

« A foreigner arrives in Venice, enters a hotel apparently one of the most respectable, and there he believes himself to be safe from every dishonest attempt, and in that hotel, although of the very first rank, indeed just because it is of the very first rank, there is the proprietor sometimes apathetic, and very often bribed by the shop-keepers, there is the manager always bribed, and the porter is also paid a higher bribe than the others. In these traps the foreigner is so caught that he cannot help forming his opinions according to those which in the hotel are instilled into him in those snares it is taught that the only firms in Venice worth recommending are those of Testolini, Gelsomini and Candiani.

« It is very possible that these three firms may not have exerted a guilty and corrupt influence on the hotels, but yet there are facts which would demand a little explanation. In one of the principal Venetian hotels, of which it necessary the respected name can be given, the real master seemed to be the firm of the Bros. Testolini, and when that of Messrs. Gelsomini wished to have a footing there, and

to compete with Testolini in obtaining foreign customers, it had to pay a not-indifferent sum of money in so many fine hundred-franc banknotes, and in gold crownpieces. The penal code cannot be without penalties for such arrangements, but, in the rearrangement of the code, Zanardelli (*) might think of those frequent notorious and proveable cases. lest the system of *reclame* should some fine day go so far as to handcuff foreigners and take them under a strong escort to visit the various industrial establishments.

« In the Hotel Vittoria the agents of the firm of Testolini have access by preference. if appearances do not deceive us.

« A short while ago Signor Ed. Ganzmann arrives from Trieste, goes to that hotel, orders of a manufacturer some designs upon which to give a commission for works of some considerable amount. When the manufacturer brings the designs to the hotel the porter prevents him from speaking with Signor Ganzmann, who afterwards writes from Trieste expressing his annoyance against the manufacturer.

« In the Hotel Britannia on the contrary are favoured the agents of Tomasi and Gelsomini, a

(*) The Italian Minister of Grace and Justice to whom Prof. Ottolenghi's pamphlet was dedicated.

firm which also depends a good deal on the sympathy which the Hotel Europa cherishes for it. Here at least the sympathy may have an excuse in the correct and punctual manner in which a Saloon of the Hotel Europa was furnished by the firm of Tomasi and Gelsomini, and still more in the moderate price charged.

« At the Grand Hotel Candiani and Testolini prevail; and in others there is *relatively* a little more free competition due to certain facts upon which it is well to be silent.

« In all these hotels regard is had for a prince of the blood royal as for any commoner whatever. A fine game was played upon a prince who will one day mount one of the most powerful thrones of Europe when the Queen his mother shall leave it. This prince gave a commission for work to Besarel, and when Besarel wished to speak with his patron, His Excellency the hotel porter made such opposition that the interview did not take place; and when afterwards the prince being annoyed sent to request Besarel to present himself at the hotel at *eight* o'clock, the porter had Besarel summoned for *nine* o'clock; and this poor devil rushed off hurriedly without even changing his clothes, not knowing that it is impossible to arrive an hour before setting out. By good fortune he found the prince; who was just going to get

into the gondola and to leave Venice, and he was in time to tell him of the game which had been played on him. The porter being suspected of too great friendship and esteem for the firm of Testolini was dismissed, whether immediately or soon afterwards does not matter, and in his place was taken another porter still more enamoured of Testolini than the first had been.

« This is not a matter for the penal code, it is however a sort of brigandage which forces the consuls to say to their countrymen: « Gentlemen! in Venice they will try to fleece you, take care of yourselves! »

« But the consuls are wrong, there are firms which do not enjoy the sympathy of hotel-porters, nor that of the interpreters, and of the gondoliers, three most respectable classes which civilized society ought to do without.

« It is difficult to know how much the sympathy of the porters costs to Testolini, to Candiani and to Gelsomini; it might be the effect of platonism innate in certain people, every one knows that questions of idiocyncrasy are the most difficult to solve, but it is most certain that this sympathy must produce an effect injurious to the good name of the city, which ought to rise *en masse* against the few who are the cause of so much dishonour.

« Translating into figures the results of the coalition we find that upon each hundred franc's worth of goods which the foreigner purchases, the division is generally made thus :

| | | |
|---|-------|------|
| To the Agent of the shopkeeper | Frcs. | 1.— |
| To the Interpreter or <i>valet-de-place</i> | » | 20.— |
| To the Hotel manager | » | 15.— |
| To the Hotel porter | » | 20.— |
| To the Gondolier | » | 4.— |

Total Francs 60.—

« Which is as much as to say that 60 per cent is absorbed by the Camorra, 20 per cent remains for the dealer, and the other 20 represents the prime cost of the material and workmanship.

« Every one can see that, things having arrived at such a point, the mistification is such that it cannot pass unobserved by one who directs the Italian magistracy; since although knowing what it is, we know not what it may become; for the camorra having become daring through the useless efforts of the magistracy has invented new means for refining the insidious system, and has even made publicly known by means of the press some wheel of its mechanism.

« In fact, to take one among many instances, Dr. Napoleone Candiani in the beginning of the

year 1887 printed and distributed among the gondoliers the following circular :

(*) « To recompense the assiduity of the gondoliers » and boatmen who shall frequent with foreigners » the Casa Candiani, the following prizes are » established, to be paid on the 23 rd. of December » of the current year, to those who shall have » made the greatest number of visits, which shall » be registered by means of small checks (*scontrini*) which will be consigned from time to » time.

» The above mentioned prizes will not pre- » judicate *all the other usual gains and rights.*

| | | | |
|-------------|---------------|--------|-----|
| One prize | of | Francs | 100 |
| » | » » | | 50 |
| Two prizes | » » | | 25 |
| Five prizes | » » | | 10 |

Nap. Dr. Candiani. »

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« Signor Candiani, who foreseeing the reaction raised by his circular, would willingly have spent hundreds and hundreds of francs to have it suppressed — and offers were made with that object — Signor Candiani cannot put forward as an excuse the fact that the competition of other dealers obliges

(*) Literal Translation .

him to proceed in this way, for if it be true that the firms of Testolini and Gelsomini do similar things as might be asserted in excuse by the firm of Candiani, and still more by some agent of the same, it is equally true that the *code* (of law) speaks of free competition, indeed, of natural competition, and the competition of Candiani seems quite other than this.

« The free and natural competition in Venice is carried on by the honest shopkeepers who die rather than yield to the temptations of the *camorristi*, or withdraw from a traffic which brings dishonor upon those who practise it.

« It is not to be forgotten that in order still more to attract foreigners, Dr. Candiani and his friends the other dealers surround themselves with trusty agents, heavily paid, having the not very honourable duty of aiding them in the noble enterprise; which agents, well known in Venice and beyond it, constitute with their chief a most formidable association which for ten years has been able to exist and to develop itself in spite of the indignation of the public. »



CAMORRISTIC LEALTÀ.

THE EXTREME GRAVITY of the accusations thus boldly launched by Professor Ottolenghi against the conduct of certain business firms in Venice is not in the slightest degree exaggerated, but decidedly understates the case; while he makes no mention of several other firms which are well known to form a part of the Camorra. The rottenness of trade transactions is much more serious and extensive than he admits; and the substitution of inferior goods, the appropriation of other persons' names, the robbery by means of pretended custom-house charges, and the forgery of signatures to receipts for goods, are not even mentioned by him; nor is there any adequate exposure of the part played by the hotels, and by the *servi di piaçza* in misleading and despoiling visitors. It is however due to this versatile and fearless writer to admit that

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the merit of what has hitherto been done, and of that which is now in progress, for the protection of foreign visitors and the rehabilitation of Venetian trade, is in great part his own.

The Professor's labours did not, however, end with the publication of his pamphlet, but by his efforts a committee was formed to take definite action in the matter, and to institute a campaign against the Camorra.

The gentle and somewhat indolent character of Venetians indisposes them for continuous effort, and while recognizing the advisability of any given course of action they hesitate to exert themselves for its realization. Hence it is necessary that one person be found who shall nominally direct the undertaking but in reality do most of the work, while his associates sun themselves in the light of their standard-bearer and champion.

Recognizing this necessity for a standard-bearer to head the movement towards reform, Prof. Ottolenghi presented to his committee a certain Comm. Paulo Fambri, a hydraulic engineer, and formerly a deputy in the Italian parliament, as a suitable leader and president. This was a decided error of judgment, for Prof. Ottolenghi should have known that this individual did not possess any practical acquaintance with commercial questions; and that his political antecedents and his opinions were not

such as to fit him for the position, nor calculated to inspire complete confidence in his direction of affairs. A domineering temper, an insatiable egotism, and a desire for the extinction of unpleasant memories of the past in a new political triumph, are not sufficient qualifications for leadership in a difficult movement of reform. The error of this selection was of course shared by those who confirmed the nomination; but it had the result of increasing tenfold the difficulties with which the reformers had to contend; and has finished by alienating a number of their most strenuous supporters.

The leading propositions which this provisional committee accepted as a basis of action were the following:

1. *A Public Lecture or conference*: Proposed by Comm. Fambri.

2. A petition to the Municipio requesting the appointment of *A special department for regulating all matters connected with the guides and gondoliers*: Proposed by Cav. Guggenheim.

3. *The Establishment of a Permanent Exhibition of local art products, and of a Fund for giving assistance to poor art-workers*: Proposed by Prof. Ottolenghi.

4. *The founding of a newspaper to be devoted to the interests of genuine and legitimate business*: Proposed by Comm. Salviati.

5. *The Constitution of an Order of Cavalieri della Lealtà Commerciale* (Cavaliers of Commercial Honesty): Proposed by Comm. Fambri.

Cavalieri della Lealtà forsooth! That one suggestion should have opened the eyes of the blindest among the members of the Committee to the real character of their president; and should have led to the immediate removal of a man who at the very commencement of a struggle against dishonesty thought principally of dubbing himself with a fictitious title of honour.

A date was soon fixed for the Public Lecture, and Prof. Ottolenghi who had in his possession a great number of important documents relating to the question, articles of copper which had been sold for gold, articles of trifling value sent to purchasers instead of costly goods they had paid for, and formal letters of protest from the injured parties; gave up a large portion of this positive evidence to Comm. Fambri in order that it might serve towards the exposure of the Camorra and its actions. But on the very day fixed for the Lecture, two Venetian tradesmen, Sig. Jesurum and signor Sarfatti, mutual friends of Comm. Fambri and the three firms mentioned in Prof. Ottolenghi's pamphlet, introduced the representatives of these firms to the lecturer; and Messrs. Testolini, Messrs. Tomasi and Gelsomini, and Dr. Candiani

undertook to adopt a new line of conduct for the future; offering to deposit as a guarantee a sum of money amounting to upwards of two thousand pounds. This promise was publicly announced by Comm. Fambri that same evening in his lecture, and was immediately recognized as a clever *ruse* to disarm him, and to secure his sympathy, and possibly his active co-operation, in their behalf.

The worst fears have since been realized, and the whole of the subsequent operations have been marked, on Comm. Fambri's part, by a persistent endeavour to thwart those who desired a genuine and thorough reform, to protect the camorristi from exposure, and to consider the interests of what he eupheistically termed the *dissidenti* quite as much as those of honest dealers.

The lecture was a complete disillusion, in spite of a good deal of cheap sentiment and some very piquant anecdotes of dishonest dealing; the rottenness of the camorristic system as a whole was not fully exposed; the documentary evidence was not shewn to the public; and the lecturer declared that the Camorra had practically ceased from that day, as he had received a promise to that effect from men whom he was obliged to believe *gentiluomini*.

In this way the Camorra obtained a victory at the very outset of the campaign, and many

members of the provisional committee openly asserted that their leader had deserted or betrayed them.

Their obvious duty at this moment was to get rid of their president, but, willing to hope for the best, they allowed him to remain. A petition to the Municipio was drawn up, signed and forwarded. The question of establishing a Permanent Exhibition to combat the influence of the Camorristi was then brought under consideration; a scheme was drawn up with the avowed object of affording to honest and *bona fide* art-workers and producers an opportunity for showing their work to foreign visitors; premises were selected; and a banker was found who engaged to provide the necessary funds for carrying out the speculation. But the sinister influences which had already seduced Comm. Fambri from his original attitude now induced him to take a further step. He insisted that even the camorristi themselves should be accepted as exhibitors; and threatened that in default of the acceptance of this condition he would withdraw from the presidency of the Committee. A preparatory and packed meeting was held, and the committee yielded to the insolent dictation; another fatal error, which was, of course, a second and decided victory of the Camorra.

Nothing could more clearly have demon-

strated want of sincerity in a leader; or exhibited in a worse light the proverbial *fiacona* of the Venetian character. If there had yet lived in the breasts of these *industriali* one spark of that proud independence which characterised the old Republic of S. Mark, short work would have been made of any such modern Carmagnola, seeking his own interests while pretending to serve the State.

The immediate result of this conduct was the withdrawal or hostility of some of the most respectable and prominent members of the provisional committee; and a breaking up ensued which threatened to cause the collapse of the whole scheme; but as the one proposition which really interested Comm. Fambri was the formation of his new order of *Cavaliers*, a set of statutes was drawn up, and a number of individuals, mostly selected by himself, were persuaded to let themselves be nominated as members. This self-appointed Committee, superseding the provisional one, arrogates to itself the performance of judicial functions; and pretends to summon before its shadowy tribunal any persons who may be accused of commercial malpractices.

Up to the present time its principal work has been the compilation of a set of rules for the conducting of honest business (*commercio leale*). These rules directly authorize — so far as a self-constituted and utterly irresponsible body can au-

thorize — the payment of 10 per cent commission to guides and couriers on all sums expended by foreigners whom they may conduct to places of business. Worse than this, — hotel-porters are to have 5 per cent commission on all business resulting from their sole recommendation; and gondoliers — though they are not to expect as a right the payment of a fee for every person they conduct to a showroom or factory, are to be gratified by a certain fixed fee when any purchases are made by their « fares ».

This is simply sanctioning one of the essential principles of the Camorra, namely that a foreign visitor is fair game for plunder; and establishes the principle that prices are to be arranged so as to allow of these commissions being paid. In other words a tax is to be put upon visitors in order to supply guides, hotel-porters, and gondoliers with gains to which they have no right whatever, and which they have not in any way earned.

Commissions and « gratifications » will of course always be given for business procured; but the custom is only honest when the dealer shares *his own legitimate profits* with those who have rendered him assistance; and it is dishonest when the price of an article is greatly increased in order to allow of extravagant commissions being given to other persons while the dealer still retains

all his own profits. This is the case in the establishments of the camorristi, where often as much as *60 per cent* of the price paid by a foreigner is divided among intermediaries. On one occasion an English lady of our acquaintance bought some music at a shop on the Piazza and requested that it might be sent to a Hotel on the Riva, together with the bill: this last was found to be more than double the fair charge, and on complaint being made with threats of exposure, the shopkeeper explained that he had had to pay a loafer who declared he had brought the lady to the shop; he had to pay a messenger to carry the parcel; and he had to pay a commission to the porter of the hotel; and that, of course, not wishing to be a loser, he had charged the amount in the lady's bill! Another lady bought a pair of gloves at a shop in the Merceria for two and a half francs, and the guide who had accompanied her there demanded *as his right* one franc commission. When this was refused, he made use of foul language and declared he would never take a customer to that shop again.

Even if the rule of the *Lealtà* committee could be enforced — which is absolutely impossible — the evil would still only be diminished, and not by any means eradicated; while if the 10 per cent commission be resignedly winked at, the system is

but a bribe offered to guides and others to exert all their energies towards leading visitors into shops in order to make them spend money, instead of occupying the day in shewing them the treasures of the city, the very duty for which they are employed and paid.

Only those who have experienced the insistent pestering of these greedy touters can have any idea of the annoyance and disgust they cause to travellers, who naturally revolt at the unpleasant thought that they are only looked upon as birds to be trapped or game to be snared; indeed the very names given in Venetian dialect to the touts and agents who stand at shop doors and about the Piazza to entice travellers are *batidori* and *oseladori* — beaters and birdcatchers!

The chief stronghold of the Camorra has always been in the Hotels, as it is there that the visitor feels most confidence in the recommendations given; and the action of the *Lealtà* committee tends to maintain it there, instead of being directed towards its extirpation. From the waiter to the manager, from the porter to the proprietor every person whom the foreigner was likely to come in contact with has — with some honourable exceptions — used his constant endeavours to persistently recommend, not those firms selling the best goods, and known all over the world in

consequence, but those giving the highest commissions to intermediaries. As a matter of fact, in the earlier days of the Camorra, guides and gondoliers were accustomed to receive their orders from the officials of the Hotels as to what establishments were to be patronized, and while these pages are being composed the manager of one of the chief Hotels on the Grand Canal has refused admittance to a certain guide, hitherto recommended by him, and now himself accompanies visitors to Testolini's shop, because this guide refused to obey his camorristic orders. Of course under the new rule the porter will say to visitors « dont go shopping with the guides or they will get ten per cent on what you spend, but go on my recommendation » ; and he will hold his tongue about his own expectations. Who is to guarantee that he will not get ten or even twenty per cent instead of the five per cent which the camorristic Lealtà committee authorizes? An additional reason for the insistent recommendations made by the porters of some hotels is that they are actually *partners* in camorristic firms; in one well known instance the porter having a share amounting to 20,000 francs in the capital of a certain firm which could be named.

When a hotel proprietor or director, in good faith, recommends a firm that he honestly believ-

es to be worthy of patronage, and does not do so with the scope of pecuniary gain, he is rendering good service to visitors; but there are hotel proprietors here, whose honesty is undoubted, who have assured the writer that they now refuse to recommend any firms, even the most respectable, lest they themselves should incur the suspicions of a favouritism due to mercenary motives. Prof. Ottolenghi in his daring exposure of the truth has earned the gratitude of all visitors to Venice; but as he has mentioned the Hotel Europa it is only fair to state that with regard to this Hotel he seems to have been misinformed, for the present writer is able to assert positively, as the result of his own investigations, that the proprietors and the director of the « Europa » watch keenly lest the camorra should enter their house; nor does it seem to have ever had any hold there. This statement is made the more willingly because the « Europa » is a family hotel of the very first class, and one to which visitors may go in the confidence of finding superior accommodation and courteous treatment.

Some of the principal Hotels too have a little Camorra of their own and occasionally descend to very mean subterfuges for the purpose of filching visitors from rival houses. The gondolier is generally the person who does the deceiving, and is

well paid for his pains. There is no limit to the falsehoods he will invent if the Hotel you ask for is not the one where he is accustomed to get his fees ; and some of the more respectable if smaller houses are simply « boycotted » by these arrogant public servants. It would be easy to name a portion of one line of railway not so very far from Venice, where even the railway officials are paid to recommend certain hotels, and do so by libelling others.

The *Lealtà* committee's rule about fees to gondoliers is merely a jesuitical way of saying « yes » and « no » in the same breath. It really sanctions a commission, and therefore holds out a bribe to gondoliers to pester foreigners into visiting certain shops, when they want to do other things. Besides this it confirms the now prevalent belief in this commission being a right.

Not long since two English ladies residing in Venice took a gondola in order to do a round of « shopping ». On dismissing the gondolier afterwards, he refused his proper fare, saying : — « In the last shop took I you to they would not give me my commission, so *you must pay it to me!* »

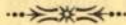
If this could happen to persons who have lived in the city for years, what may not happen to strangers speaking almost nothing of any language but their own?

The other rules of the *Lealtà* committee are of small importance to visitors, as like the others, they cannot be enforced, and will not be taken advantage of like those we have named; but they simply lay down some of the laws of commercial morality and decency, which honest men observe of their own accord; and in this case they only serve to gild the pill authorizing camorristic commissions.

It may seem strange to one who is not familiar with the circumstances that among all these rules there should be no reference whatever to that special feature of camorristic operations to which we have previously called attention, and which is precisely what renders so many other practices possible, namely the suppression of competition by the forcible restriction of all business to some halfdozen firms, and these the least worthy of patronage. There are scores of establishments to which a foreigner might go with the certainty of finding honest work at reasonable prices — of course not forgetting the general necessity for bargaining — but to these places no one is ever taken by touts and guides, or sent by Hotel porters, because they are not in league with the Camorra. Matters would soon begin to right themselves if the stream of business were left free to distribute itself naturally, as it might choose, instead of being

confined to half a dozen firms whose prices are so often iniquitous and whose actions are dishonest. This point is more important than it may seem at first sight for no possible set of rules can ensure universal morality, but when visitors are free to go where they please, and are warned of the limits of the evil which exists, it simply remains for them to exercise ordinary caution so as to avoid falling into the traps which are set for them.

This caution is as necessary now as ever it was, for the work of the camorra still continues in full force, in spite of the promise given to Comm. Fambri on the day of his lecture, but it is not yet announced that he has sequestered the money offered as a guarantee; and indeed it seems as if the agreement had taken some other form.



SELF - DEFENCE.

THE VENICE NEWS, a small English paper published here weekly, has, during the past four months, almost entirely dedicated itself to the exposure of the Camorra, and to warning visitors against its devices. The plainspeaking which has always characterized it has procured for it a good deal of virulent abuse from the Camorristi; and some of the Hotels commenced a series of feeble reprisals, refusing to allow it to appear in their reading-rooms, and some of them even declining to furnish their lists of visitors for publication; a method of fighting which was speedily found to be useless if not disastrous to those who used it. The president of the Lealtà committee publicly referred to this paper as « malignant » (*stampa maligna*) because it unmasked his camorristic actions done under the pretence of opposing the Camorra.

The Venetian press, as already stated, has oc-

asionally referred to the question in a lukewarm way, but after a few mild *tirades* has always subsided rapidly into that conspiracy of silence which it affects; and its arguments may be summed up in the declaration that dirty linen should be washed at home; in other words, nothing should be openly said which would tend to put visitors on their guard. Unfortunately the Venetian press does nothing towards washing the aforesaid dirty linen, and it has been reserved for a foreign newspaper to take up the matter in defence of foreign visitors, and at all events expose the foulness of the linen spread for their use. According to certain local papers the one thing of importance is that foreigners should come here and should spend their money. If they are cheated, oh! of course that is not quite right! but, for heaven's sake, let us hold our tongues lest they should give up coming here to be cheated. We must get their money some how, and honestly if possible, but we must get it, for without the foreigner's money Venice would be in a bad way indeed!

The supersensitiveness of Venetians to anything like criticism or censure has in this case not stood them in good stead. A little courageous facing of facts, and a determination to put right what was wrong, would have avoided a good deal of the mischief of various kinds which has been caused.

As it is they have allowed this camorra to grow and firmly establish itself, and have insisted upon the virtue of silence, until, not the camorristi only — who are few in number and whose names are well known — but the scores and hundreds of respectable tradesmen, shopkeepers, artists, and art-workers who have nothing to do with this association, have been included in the general condemnation. Nor are the numerous victims of fraud and dishonesty in various forms to be blamed for this. As we have already explained, the Camorra acts by suppressing competition, so that visitors have only been brought into contact with camorristi, and they were not able to recognize any distinctions. But behind and beyond these there remained the great mass of workers, producers, and honest dealers, who for several years have seen very few customers enter their workshops or showrooms; who from positions of comfort if not of affluence have been reduced to poverty; many of whom have been compelled to close their establishments, and are now toiling at starvation wages for the very men who have procured their ruin. Even those who have been just able to weather the storm, and who still hold on in the hope of better days, are driven to a very narrow margin of enterprize. The writer has repeatedly heard men like Della Torre, Guggenheim, Salviati,

Toso, Christophe, Besarel, Dal Tedesco, and other men whose reputations are world-wide, and who have, in fact, created the reputation of modern Venetian work, declare that last year, when hundreds of thousands of visitors from all parts of the world crowded into Venice for the Grand National Exhibition of Fine Art, for the water-fêtes, the concerts, the illuminations, which this city alone can offer, and did offer on that occasion, and when the camorristi are known to have swept millions of francs into their pockets — they, these respectable *industriali*, did not see as many visitors in their establishments as came to them during the fatal year 1886 when the cholera scare and epidemic drove away all foreigners, and more than half the upper classes of Venetians themselves.

The object of this pamphlet is to make known the facts of the case from a foreigner's point of view, to expose the wrong, and to correct an impression which has got abroad to the effect that all Venetian business is dishonest. An outcry has been raised that by speaking frankly we shall practically declare a sort of commercial quarantine against Venice, and that visitors will be deterred from coming here at all. The mischief has been done already by the Venetians themselves through the folly of not stamping out the disease at its commencement by suitable measures of repression;

and the answer to objections of the kind we have referred to may be found in the following paragraph published in the *Venice News* of January 14th. 1888: « We have never been advocates for » « quarantine » in cases of epidemic disease, nor » do we suggest it in the present instance ; but on » the contrary we say : Come to Venice ; enjoy her » ravishing beauty ; study the countless records of » her imperishable Past ; or idle away a few restful » hours on her magnificent Piazza ; but remember » that there are many individuals who will endeavour to make you spend your money in certain » shops only, let us say for instance in those of » **Testolini. Gelomini. Candiani. Sarfatti,** » **Jesurun. Forlani. or Rubbi**, in order that » they get may **20. 30** or even **40** per cent commission on your expenditure : and that the shopkeepers, poor devils ! will be obliged to pay this » enormous and preposterous commission in order » to retain the aid of the *camorristi* in procuring » customers. Remember that every time a gondolier » takes you to any of these establishments he will » get a fee for so doing whether you buy or not ; » and above all *never make a purchase of any » kind when accompanied by a guide or tout* ; a » piece of advice which has for years been given » in the principal guide-books such as those of » « Baedeker, Murray etc. »

To this must be added a warning to distrust any recommendations given by the porters and other servants of the hotels — they are interested parties, and are looking forward to a commission. It would be well also to put no trust whatever in the lealtà committee as at present constituted and directed. It might have been the means of saving Venetian trade from the stigma of dishonesty; — it has only endeavoured to shield the camorristi from well-merited obloquy and failure; and it has done its utmost to establish a new camorra in the place of the old one.

Foreigners who may find themselves victimized need only make complaints to the consuls of their respective countries; and these officials can assist them to obtain redress. In case of any gondolier giving trouble it is necessary to ascertain and make a note of the number which his boat bears. This of itself will be quite sufficient to secure his identification, and there is now a department of the Municipio authorized to receive and consider complaints of this nature.

In treating of the Agencies employed by the Camorra, or in other words the machinery forming part of the Camorra, we have assigned a considerable part to those individuals who are known as guides, interpreters, touts, *valets-de-place*, or courriers. We have maintained, that without their active

co-operation the efforts of the Camorra would have been to all intents and purposes powerless. Guides are persons in whom a foreign visitor must, in the nature of things, have a considerable amount of confidence; and to their honesty and faithfulness is often entrusted not only the mere pleasure of travel, but in many cases the whole question of expenditure, and in some cases even the traveller's safety and life. The importance of being able to find a trustworthy and faithful Guide is not easily over rated; and here in Venice, as in other places, there are to be found men of that calling who are in every way worthy of the confidence reposed in them.

We call attention to the fact, not merely in the interest of foreigners but in that of the honest guides themselves; and these men would best serve their own interests by separating themselves absolutely and entirely from those others of the craft who are less fairly and fully trustworthy.

In Venice as we have said, the generic term guide is applied too indiscriminately to a lot of individuals who have no claim whatever to the title either as regards capability or honesty, and thus the slur very properly cast upon a class of men who are worthy only of unmixed execration is apt to fall as well upon men who have certainly not more but perhaps rather less of the failings of our common

humanity than their fellows. There are among the guides in Venice some who have recognized that *Honesty is the best policy*, and who have refused to have anything to do with the mis-tification, the swindling, the persistent and scandalous dishonesty of those shopkeepers who form the nucleus of the camorra. There are others less courageously honest who are yet willing and anxious to range themselves on the side of right, and who under a judicious supervision may be trusted to conduct themselves creditably and reasonably.

A great injustice is done to the good name and reputation of the guides as a class by the difficulty of distinguishing between the more respectable ones and the great mass of loafers and touts who assume the name and function of guides, and many of whom are, through the blameable laxity of the Municipal authorities, furnished with the usual license or « patent ».

There is a Society of guides consisting of some twenty eight members, which, while formed especially with the object of a *Benefit Club* for mutual help in time of sickness or misfortune, very reasonably attends to other prominent interests of the class to which its members belong. This Society has recently sent a deputation to the *Venice News* to make the declaration that it, the said society, was in the first instance formed — in 1876 — with the express

object of combatting the excessive commissions offered by certain dealers; that the members of the society make no claim for any fixed commission at all; that foreigners are to be left free to go where they desire without pressure being put upon them to visit only certain establishments; and that when information is asked for from these guides by foreigners who are employing them they intend only to recommend those firms which have a reputation for honesty, and more especially they will recommend the actual art-workers and artists themselves.

This declaration was duly formulated, and was signed by the President of the Society, Sig. G. Alpron, and by the other members of the deputation; and the *Venice News* reserves the fullest power of directing the attention of the responsible officers of the Society to infractions of these rules on the part of any of its members; a power which will be exercised without fear or favour in the case of any reasonable ground of complaint.

Of course the conditions just specified leave a large margin for individual liberty of interpretation, and the fulfilment of the promise depends more on the honesty and good faith of those who make it, than on the fear of penalty in case of failure; but those who show themselves honest deserve the strongest support, and it is

quite possible that in the future this Society may be disposed to make more definite and precise stipulations.

Let it be remembered that the camorra exists solely upon the money extorted from *foreigners* by means of swindling and deceit; and if visitors will avoid frequenting the establishments of the camorristi, the whole system will fall to the ground.

The natural attractions and subtle charms of Venice are in themselves sufficient to draw to its shores all who love the Beautiful, whether in Nature or in Art; and in its population there yet lives a large share of that Art-spirit which in past ages helped to build up its lasting renown. Among these humbler workers — the real producers and artists — whether in glass, in wood, in ivory, or in gold, visitors can yet expend their money and their patronage without enriching the rascally speculators of the Venetian Camorra.



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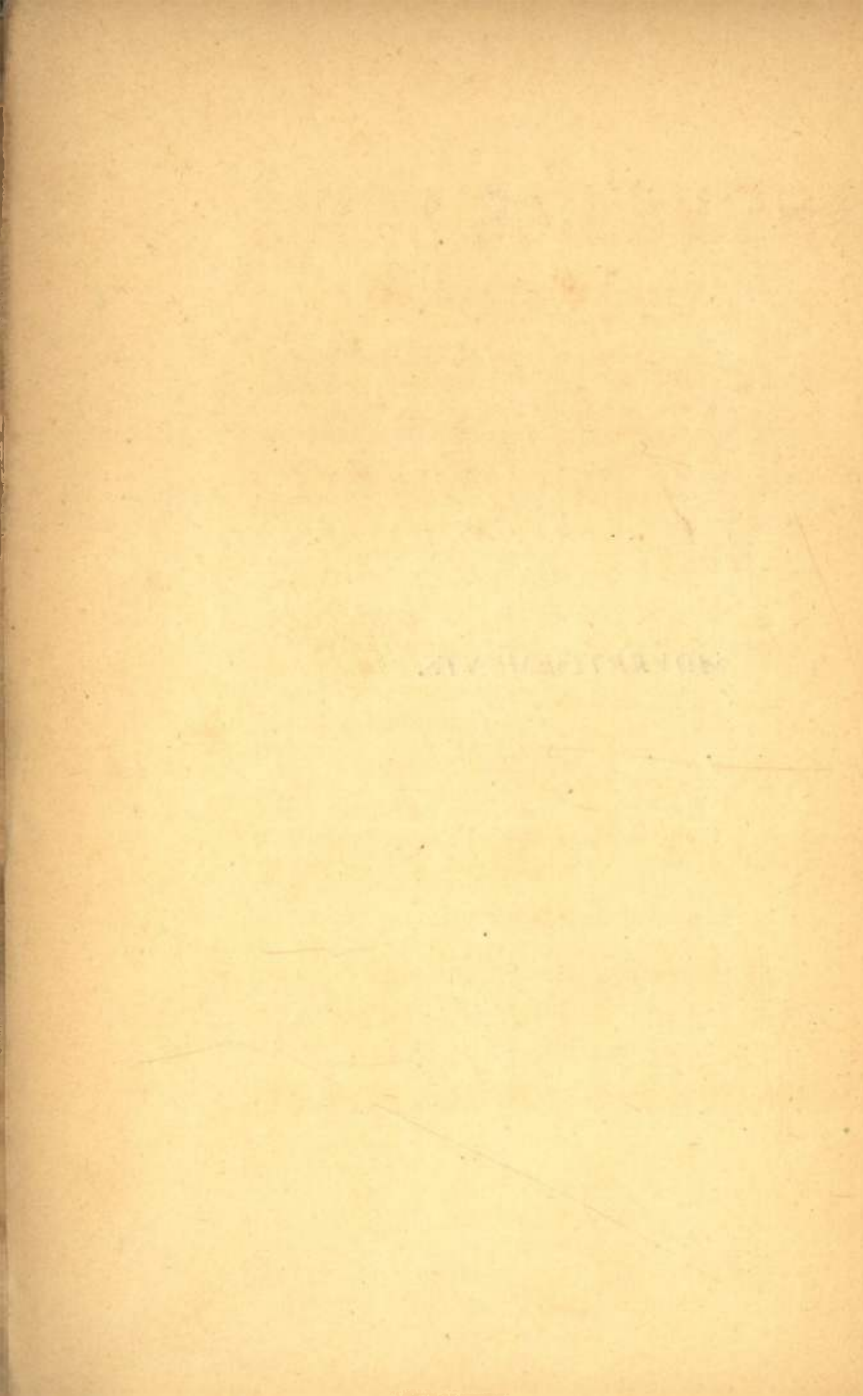
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HOTEL EUROPA

GRAND CANAL — VENICE

One of the oldest and best-known Hotels in Venice
founded in 1815

In this long period it has sheltered many of the most illustrious visitors to Venice, including large numbers of foreigners.

Especially favoured by great artists, some of its rooms have acquired a historical reputation. In room N. 45 the illustrious Verdi wrote *Rigoletto* and completed *La Traviata*. Here have resided Wagner, Meyerbeer, Ristori etc. In N. 12 took place the cession of the Venetian province in 1866 by General Le Boeuf. It has several times been the chosen residence of the Imperial Princes and of the Court of Germany, of the Queen of Spain, the Queen of Servia, etc.

The Hotel EUROPA is the nearest to the Piazza of S. Mark, and has a **SPLENDID VIEW** not only on the Grand Canal but over what is known as the Basin of S. Mark.

THE HOTEL EUROPA

MAY BE ESPECIALLY CONSIDERED AS A FIRST CLASS

FAMILY HOTEL

very highly recommended to foreign visitors, who will find there the most trustworthy and careful attention.

GRAND CANAL — VENICE

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M. CURIE-SKŁODOWSKIEJ
w Lublinie

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