

THE DOGARESSA

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649564156

The Dogaressa by W. G. Melmonti & Clare Brune & George Augustus Sala

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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W. G. MELMONTI & CLARE BRUNE & GEORGE AUGUSTUS SALA

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W G MELMONTÍ

TRANSLATED BY

CLARE BRUNE

WITH PREFACE BY

GEORGE AUGUSTUS SALA

London

REMINGTON & CO PUBLISHERS

HENRIETTA STREET COVENT GARDEN

1887

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PREFACE.

MORE years ago than I care to remember I was travelling by road in Northern Italy, in the company of that accomplished scholar, critic, and novelist, Mr. George Meredith; and one fine afternoon in autumn we entered, by the upper road, the interesting and romantic town of Bergamo. All tourists are familiar with the exquisite beauty and extent of the views that stretch on every side from the heights of Bergamo; and Mr. George Meredith expatiated with true poetic fervour on the magnificence of the vista, on the south side: reaching as the view does to the Alps and the Apennines beyond the plains of Lombardy, and revealing the towers of Monza, of Cremona, and of Milan.

“I love Bergamo—I will live in Bergamo—I will die in Bergamo,” cried Mr. George Meredith, who, for the first time was revelling in the enchanting prospect.

I quietly told my enthusiastic friend that I knew Bergamo very well, and that although it was certainly a city commanding extremely picturesque views, it was otherwise an exceedingly dirty place, reeking with the most objectionable odours, and not

at all the kind of town (for an Englishman, at least), either to live in or to die in.

These remarks concerning Bergamo are to be taken, if you please, as a preface to a preface. I have been asked to say a few words concerning Clare Brune's translation of "*La Dogaressa in Venezia*," by Professor Melmontí; and I resolved that my prefatory remarks should be about Venice as a city much affected by English travellers; but no sooner had I begun to recall my memories of the Adriatic, to conjure up mind-pictures of the Piazza San Marco and the Molo, of the Rialto, and the Salute, of the Dogana and the Lido, than the incident of Mr. George Meredith at Bergamo recurred to me. The poet after all is Prophet as well as King; and Mr. Meredith had a right to extol Bergamo before he knew it: for, similarly, I loved Venice long before ever I stepped into a gondola or wandered under the arcades of the Procuratie; I loved the City in the Sea for years ere beholding it; and I love it now. I should like to live there in the spring and the autumn. I should like to die there, and be carried in a gondola to the Island of Tombs; but that there is a far more beautiful resting-place for one's mortal coil in Italy: the Protestant Cemetery, hard by the Pyramid of Caius Sestius and the wall of Rome.

Yes, I love Venice; and since I have read "*The Dogaressa*" I have sat night after night turning over a portfolio full of photographs of the stones of Venice, and engravings after Canaletto and Guardi

depicting the Venice of the past. A very quaint Venice is the Queen of the Adriatic as she is portrayed by the two great artists just named. At the outset, the full-bottomed periwigs and scarlet gowns of the Councillors, the hooped petticoats of the ladies, and the embroidered coats, silk stockings and high-heeled shoes of the Venetian nobility seem in sad dissonance with the Byzantine architecture and the mosaics of San Mark, and with the stately lines of the Palladian palaces on the Canalazzo; but by degrees you grow accustomed to these strange contrasts. You can bring yourself even to tolerate a gondolier with a pigtail: for among the charms of Venice is her capacity for absorbing and subordinating everything to her own beauty, and harmonizing with herself the meanest and commonest of her surroundings. When I was last in Venice, two or three years ago, that dreadful aquatic abomination, a steam launch, had just made its first appearance on the Grand Canal. I can hear it in imagination, and with horror, now panting and puffing, clacking and sputtering, and snorting; but I have no doubt that when I return to the beloved city I shall find that something has been done by the invisible influence of Venice herself to soften and refine and take off the rough edges of the steam launch. Extinguish the fire of its paltry little boiler; dismantle it, and haul it up high and dry into a Venetian boat-builder's yard; and I really think that in process of time a coarse cockney craft would suffer "a sea change" and turn into a gon-

dola. I contend that Venice has the power of making the commonest things picturesque and poetic. That railway bridge over the lagoons is not like any other railway bridge that I am aware of. It extorted admiration once, about twenty years ago, from an English commercial traveller in the bristles line of business with whom I was travelling from Padua. It was midnight when we sighted the city. "What a wiaduct, sir!" he remarked, "and how them lights in the distance shine!" To earn the eulogy of a commercial traveller in the bristles line of business is a thing indeed to be proud of. And then I return again and again to the photographs and engravings of the Venice of bygone times: I dismiss the periwigged Councillors; the ladies in hoops; the beaux in brodered coats and silken hose and high-heeled shoes; the sly-looking *abbati* in sable cassocks and shovel hats. They fade away; and I re-people the deserted halls and *stanze*, the long-drawn arcades, the narrow footways which border the canals, the labyrinth of darksome lanes which stretch from the Merceria to the Rialto; I populate these *cari luoghi* with the Venetians of the mighty past, when the Doges were amongst the most potent princes in Europe; when the Republic, although self-styled Serene, was chronically bellicose and aggressive. I see the Venice of blind old Dandolo; I see the Venice that Dante drew —

" Quale nell' arzanà de' Viniziani
Bolle l'inverno la tenace pece
A rimpalmar li legni lor nou sani

Che navicar non pouno : e'n quella vece
Chi fa suo legno nuovo, e chi ristoppa
Le coste a quel che più viaggi fece ;
Chi ribatte da proda, e chi da poppa ;
Altri fa remi, e altri volge sarte ;
Chi terzeruolo ed artimon rintoppa ;
Tal, non per fuoco, ma per divina arte,
Bollia laggiuso una pegola spessa."

And then I turn to a picture of the Giant's Staircase ; and I see the block and the headsman and Marino Faliero doomed to death, and ere he dies fiercely cursing the city and her serpent seed. Well may English folk love Venice, if only for the sake of noble Fra Paolo Sarpi, who, when religious intolerance was at its height in Italy, did not hesitate to minister to a Protestant Englishman sick unto death. But there are a score more ties which bind us to Venice. In no country are the pictures of Canaletto so highly appreciated as they are in England ; and it is pleasant to remember that one of the earliest patrons of the great Venetian painter was the English Consul at Venice, and that when Canaletto came to England he found a more illustrious patron and friend in the Duke of Northumberland, for whom he painted the splendid pictures of "Charing Cross" and "Whitehall," which are now at Sion House. Venice is further endeared to us by the noble poetry of Byron and Rogers, by the sumptuous pictures of Turner and Stanfield, of Holland and Clara Montalba. It is just twenty-two years since I first took up my abode at the Hotel Victoria in Venice ; and I suppose that