

## VANDALISM AT VENICE.

### THE BEAUTIFUL ISLAND OF SANT' ELENA, SACRIFICED TO AN IRON FOUNDRY.

*From the Pall Mall Gazette.*

Many of your readers will doubtless remember the little island of Sant' Elena that lies just off the public gardens at Venice. It is always a beautiful object, whether it be in Spring, when the buds are bursting upon the trees of its garden, or in late Autumn, when the bare branches stand relieved against the red wall of the old monastery, and the pines and cypresses acquire a greater value of color from the absence of any other green. The island is so picturesquely placed, detached from Venice and yet in a measure belonging to it, like a full-stop at the end of a sentence, that most people must recall it with pleasure. The memory of it lurks unobtrusively in some still corner of the mind. No one has written much about it; no one has insisted that it must be preserved; no clamor of laudation has drawn the public eye to its quietude. We might, therefore, have hoped that the island would escape the invasion of the commercial spirit, and be left, as it was clearly intended to be, the finale and close to the splendid sweeping curve of the Riva degli Schiavoni and the public gardens. But publicity and obscurity are equally perilous to beautiful things. A company has bought the island of Sant' Elena, and is engaged in converting it into an iron foundry. A new island of forced earth-work is rising in ugly squareness around the old Sant' Elena, destroying its natural beauty of line; wharves and landing-stages are springing into view, and the place is no longer recognizable by its friends of old.

For the antiquarian and for the lover of the picturesque alike the sacrilege is horrible. The island possesses a beautiful church in the Gothic manner, disused now for some time and covered with a rich mantle of ivy, but still a very good specimen of fourteenth century Italian Gothic. While the titular saint, the Sant' Elena, from whom the island takes its name, is no less a person than the Empress Helen, mother of Constantine the Great. Her body was said to have been brought here and laid in the vaults of an earlier church, over which the present building was raised. And, coming to more recent and authentic times, this church has been the burying-place of many a famous Venetian of the Giustiniani and Loredano houses. During the last few months workmen have been busy breaking up the vaults, and many noble ashes must have been scattered by the laborer's pick. The remains of the Empress saint, however, have escaped this indignity, for the urn supposed to contain them was removed some years ago to the Church of San Pietro di Castello. But it is not the outrage to the antiquarian sentiment of reverence that is most to be regretted. No one who loves Venice can fail to feel the deepest sorrow that a lovely and essential part of the city is passing away. After all, it is the outside of Venice, the present every-day aspect of the place, that concerns most of the people who visit it. Buildings that threaten to come down must be restored, and pictures may have to be retouched or left to perish; either is a serious loss to those who know about such things; but they are few out of the many to whom Venice as a whole is the most singular and fascinating city in Europe; and there is no one of these who will not miss the accustomed beauty of Sant' Elena, and will not feel that, by its desecration, the charm of the city has suffered an irreparable injury.

There are places we all of us know to be lovely, and yet, for some reason or other, we keep our knowledge to ourselves; we do not go into raptures over them, nor write of them, nor talk of them; indeed, there is even a sense of injury, an impression that trespass is being committed on our private demesne, when by accident we find that some one else holds the same appreciative views which we believed peculiar to ourselves. No one talks or writes about the Lake of Bourget as they do of Como; yet no traveler by the Cenis will forget how lovely that lake is by day, or still more so when the moon is pouring her light upon the water through a mellow haze just tinged with blue, and the great white chateau of the House of Savoy gleams cold and weird above its headland on the further shore. So all will talk of the Lido or of San Giorgio; but most of those who know Venice will have Sant' Elena in some quiet nook of their hearts. It was so pleasant to go there on a lazy afternoon in Spring. One was sure of stillness and abundant sunshine. The old gardener, a character in his way, whom Scott would have rejoiced to draw, seemed part and parcel of the place, as wrinkled and venerable as the trees he lazily pruned; he would receive the visitor as though the place belonged to himself, but soon left him to wander at will through the garden. It could hardly be called a garden, but rather a wild shrubbery, surrounding a stretch of lawn spread out beneath an avenue of wych elm and sycamore. In the sward the periwinkles and violets and potentillas, with fruit like strawberries, and therefore called by the Italians "ingannadonna," ran riot together. At one end a little grove of pine and cypress offered its shade, and at the other a row of pomegranates put out scarlet blossoms in July. The old cloister of the monastery, open at one side to the garden, inclosed rose-beds; and up the slender shafts and round the capitals vine-stems were trained. All the stone-work was coated with a fine surface of lihen, and the "sillentium" above the broken door of the dormitory was half-covered with velvety green mosses and fern that had taken root there and in the heavy Renaissance moldings of the lavatory which stood by the refectory door. The whole garden was in admirable confusion, tangled and wild and left to itself, yet beautiful to wander in. From one corner of the island you saw the Alps rising behind Venice, each familiar peak and ridge sharply defined in serene weather—Antelao, Tofana, Sorapiz, known to the traveler among the Dolomites; or else, to the left hand, far away, the Euganean hills threw the reflection of their cones upon the water.

The place was perfectly quiet and peaceful, and silence brooded above it, except for the lapping of the water on the foundations of the old brick walls or the distant and muffled hum, borne from the arsenal across the lagoon. The crabs had it all to themselves on the oozy mud-banks that lay around the island, and fought and raced through the shallow water, leaving a rippling trail on its surface. But now their hunting-ground is covered with basements for sheds; the old monastery walls are fast being overthrown, most of the trees have been felled, and the axe is laid to the roots of the rest. A wide and yawning ditch is dug right down the middle of the lawn; soon the machinery will begin to arrive; the black pennon of smoke will stream from the chimney; the place will resound to the clank of engines. There is no hope of reprieve. Sant' Elena has gone through many changes of fortune. It has been monastery, barracks, and even bake-house ere now. At the opening of this century there were 48 ovens and 100 German bakers at work upon the island. From all these it has suffered little ill, or time has repaired the ravages inflicted. It would be mere folly, however, to hope that Sant' Elena will ever recover from the injury of the iron foundry to which it is doomed.